

MISTRESS DOROTHY
& HADDON-HALL



HENRY HASTINGS



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MISTRESS DOROTHY
of
HADDON HALL

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BEING the TRUE LOVE STORY of
DOROTHY VERNON *of* HADDON HALL

By HENRY HASTINGS



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Mistress Dorothy of Haddon Hall

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CHAPTER I.

A LOVE SCENE AND A PROPHECY.

"Dreaming again, Doll?"

The sudden question breaking into her reverie caused Dorothy Vernon to start and redden as she turned a pair of bewitching eyes towards her sister Margaret, who sat beside her on the lawn of the beautifully terraced garden of Haddon Hall one fine spring day in the early years of Queen Elizabeth's reign.

"Dreaming!" echoed Dorothy. "What have I to dream about, Madge?"

"Now, Doll, don't try to deceive me. What pretty girl of eighteen doesn't dream of lovers and love-making?"

Dorothy sighed. "I suppose some day," she said with obvious prevarication, "when you are a happy bride I shall have to decide on a partner, but till then I shall be fancy free. I'm only a girl yet."

"What about Sir Falconer Bracebridge?" said Margaret slyly.

A slight shudder passed over Dorothy, and her beautiful face grew pale. She made no reply, but bent over the book she held in her lap.

“You do not seem to like Sir Falconer, sister.” Margaret had noticed the coldness with which Dorothy had received her playful reference to Sir Falconer Bracebridge. “I cannot understand why you should shudder at the idea of so goodly a gentleman for a lover and husband. You know our father’s wish—a wish shared by Lady Vernon—that you should accept his attentions.”

Poor Dorothy was hurt, for her sister spoke sternly, and almost harshly, to her.

“Oh, Madge,” she said, throwing herself at her sister’s feet, and hiding her face in her lap, “bear with me a little. I know my father’s wish, but, oh, Madge, I do not trust Sir Falconer; I do not like him. Be considerate with me, Madge.”

Margaret Vernon was touched by her sister’s pleading tones. “There, there, my pretty dove,” she said soothingly. “I but reminded you of your duty to our parents, but do not think any more about it now.”

Doll was soothed, and the reconciliation had

just been cemented by a kiss, when Margaret excitedly whispered:

“Loose me, dear, quick! Here is Sir Thomas Stanley.”

Dorothy sprang to her feet, pushed back a rebellious lock of hair, while her sister ran forward eagerly to greet a young man attired in the height of fashion, who was descending the broad flight of steps that led from the upper terrace.

Margaret suddenly stopped in the middle of the lawn, as if she had remembered suddenly that this eagerness she had displayed was not altogether maidenly, and an almost triumphant smile flickered stealthily round the young man's lips as he doffed his plumed hat, and kissed the Lady Margaret's hand with all the grace of a courtier. Sir Thomas Stanley was the second son of the Earl of Derby, and a favorite with both Sir George and Lady Vernon. There was no doubt he was deeply smitten with the charms of Margaret, but what Margaret thought of him was a question which puzzled the young man sorely.

“What ails sweet Mistress Dorothy that she turns her back upon me?” said the young man when the formalities of greeting her sister Margaret were over.

“Oh,” explained Margaret, “we were just making up the tiniest of quarrels when you appeared, and we’ll appoint you to judge between us. The fact is Sir Falconer Bracebridge——”

Dorothy’s eyes flashed fire. “I don’t want to hear his name again,” she said petulantly, stamping her foot prettily.

“He sighs thus and thus,” continued Margaret, heaving huge sighs, not heeding the interruption, “and Dorothy is cruel.”

An arch light flashed into Dorothy’s eyes as her sister mimicked Sir Falconer.

“Oh, Sir Thomas, he is not the only one who sighs thus and thus,” echoed Dorothy. “You don’t know how my sister loves you. Night and day she sighs for you; she talks of you in her sleep. Look at the scarlet in her face; look in her eyes and read your fate. Good-by. Two’s company,” she cried, almost dancing away in mischievous delight, and blowing a kiss as she made for a flight of steps which led to the River Wye.

Margaret’s face burned, and her heart palpitated like a startled fawn’s as Sir Thomas came up to her, and took her hand. Her eyes fell before the ardent look in her lover’s as he said:

"Dorothy spoke the truth, then, and you really love me?"

Not a word fell from Margaret's lips, but a vivid blush rose to her cheeks, and she swayed slightly towards the gallant young cavalier, who was watching her every movement as if his life depended on his intentness.

"It is true, then, darling?" he continued, drawing her gently towards him.

"Yes," she breathed softly.

"And you will be my wife?"

"Yes, lord of my heart, whenever you will."

He threw his arms about her, and their lips met.

A little warning cough made them start apart, and, turning, they beheld Dorothy smiling roguishly, and accompanied by a gaunt, weird-looking old woman, the chief feature of whose swarthy face was a pair of dark, gleaming eyes, which when they rested on you seemed to pierce into your very soul.

Dorothy had met the weird figure by the servants' gate, and, learning that she was a seer of the future, had resolved that the woman should read the fortune of the lovers in the upper garden. She bade the woman follow her, and on the way thither learned that her companion was an Arabian, and that she was

called Jedaan the Prophetess by the country people. And so they arrived on the scene just as the lovers were plighting their troth.

Nor were Dorothy Vernon and her strange companion alone in breaking in on the love scene, for the Lady Matilda Vernon had also been an unwilling witness, and was even now descending the steps to the lawn.

The stepmother of the two girls extended her hand to Sir Thomas, glanced inquiringly at Margaret, and, turning to Dorothy, she said severely:

“And who is this you have brought here?”

“A prophetess, mother,” answered Dorothy merrily.

“A prophetess!” exclaimed the lady scornfully. “An impostor, a cheat. Go hence, woman,” turning to Jedaan. “Your looks make me shiver.”

A gleam of fire shot from Jedaan’s eyes. “No more an impostor than you,” she retorted.

The haughty Lady of Haddon uttered a cry of horror at being thus addressed by a wandering fortune-teller, and Sir Thomas was about to rebuke Jedaan, when Dorothy’s soft voice interposed:

“My lady, mother,” she interposed, “I am

responsible for this woman being here, and I should like if you would let me put her claims to the test. Here, Jedaan," she continued before her stepmother could speak, "look at my hand and tell me what the future holds for me."

Jedaan took the little white hand gently between her own brown ones, and thoughtfully gazed at it for a few moments.

"I see strange things in this hand," said the woman at length. "You will marry, but he whom you will marry will be none of your father's choosing. He will come like a thief in the night, and his coming shall change the fortunes of this house, for the Vernons shall know it no more, and he who rules now shall be the last Lord of Hadden."

Dorothy drew her imprisoned hand hastily away, and her face flushed, and then grew deathly pale as the meaning of the last ominous words dawned on her mind.

Lady Vernon started forward, as if she herself would strike the woman dead at her feet, but Margaret with a contemptuous laugh stepped between her stepmother and the prophetess.

"Here, witch of the evil tongue," she said,

"see if you can come nearer the truth in my case."

Jedaan caught Margaret's hand, and peered intently at it as in Dorothy's case. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but on second thought she let the hand fall. "I cannot read your fate," she said, almost sorrowfully.

"A mere trick of your craft," cried Margaret angrily. "I insist on hearing what you see in my hand."

"Do not blame me, then. You have a lover, and you will become his wife. With him you will cross the sea, but——"

"But what?"

"You will have it, then? 'Tis written in the book of fate that you shall die within a year of your wedding."

With such grim conviction were the terrible words uttered that consternation fell on the little group, and Margaret, uttering a low cry of pain, swooned in her lover's arms.

"You shameless jade," cried Lady Vernon, pale with passion, "see what you have done with your foolish words. Go, or, by my faith, the hounds shall tear you to pieces."

Dorothy trembled, for her step-mother's anger was not to be trifled with, and she knew she would have to bear the brunt of this un-

fortunate incident. In spite of her distress, however, she placed a silver coin in Jedaan's hand. "Go, go, at once," she cried, "and God grant that your cruel words may never come true."

Jedaan looked gently at Dorothy as she said: "I have spoken, and Fate is Fate." Then, without deigning to look at Lady Vernon, with bowed head, she moved slowly from sight of the awe-struck group on the lawn.

Several servants now appeared on the scene, and with their assistance Margaret quickly regained consciousness. Sir George Vernon, the Lord of Haddon, and father of Margaret and Dorothy, had been summoned when his daughter had fainted, and before the recovery of her senses he had been informed of what had taken place, and had also learned from Sir Thomas of the promise he had got from Lady Margaret. The prospect of an alliance with the powerful Earl of Derby was very gratifying to the Lord of Haddon Hall, and when Margaret came to greet her father, he, desirous to take her thoughts from the painful scene which had just taken place, placed her hand in that of Sir Thomas.

"The blessing of God be upon you, my children," he said with deep emotion, "and my

house and the house of Stanley be ever knit in the bonds of friendship. And in honor of the betrothal I command a feast to be prepared worthy of such a memorable occasion. And as for your fortune, Madge, it shall be little short of your weight in gold."

CHAPTER II.

THE BETROTHAL FEAST.

The little village of Bakewell, situated two miles from Haddon Hall, boasted an inn of renown known all over the county as "The Boar's Head," and kept by one of Sir George Vernon's tenants, Hubert Armstrong. Behind the hostelry lay a tree-shaded bowling green, in which two young men, evidently of some standing in the world, were pitting their skill against one another.

The guests—for passing travelers they were merely—desisted from their play as they watched the approach of a youth in page's attire, who seemed to wish to speak to them.

"Sirs," said the page as he came up, raising his cap, "I am a page in the service of the Lady Matilda, wife of Sir George Vernon, Lord of Haddon and King of the Peak. To-night there is to be feasting at the Hall in honor of the betrothal of Lady Margaret to Sir Thomas Stanley, and all who choose to

come are welcome. Therefore, if you are free, in my Lord and Lady's name, I bid you to the feast."

The young man listened gravely, and then an amused smile broke over his face at the strangeness of the invitation to a passing traveler.

"What, ho, John," he cried at last to his friend, who was at the other end of the green, "are you good for a royal feast to-night?"

"Ay, Will," replied the other, coming forward. "What friend have you found in Bake-well? Fie, Will, 'tis surely not a lady friend?"

"Hush, man, you know better than that," replied Will with a smile. "Here is a page of Lady Vernon, who invites us to the betrothal feast of the Lady Margaret, if it be our pleasure to attend. What do you say, John?"

"Ah," said John, his interest growing. "I have heard of Sir George Vernon's hospitality and the beauty of his daughters. Give my respects to your Lord and Lady, and say that I, John Manners, son of the Earl of Rutland, and his friend, William Aleyne, Esquire, of Nottingham, will honor ourselves by partaking of Haddon's hospitality to-night."

The page respectfully took his leave, and the two young men turned to one another.

"This is an adventure we did not look for," said Will Aleyne, "but beware of the darts from the fair Dorothy's eyes, John. The daughter of Haddon is not for the second son of the Earl of Rutland."

"Nay," replied John Manners with a blush that belied his words, for the two that very morning had been talking of the possibility of encountering the beauty of Haddon about Bakewell, "I was thinking of the service the King of the Peak might do me, if I were to go to London and seek service with Her Grace the Queen. The sword is the only weapon with which a younger son may carve his way to fortune and love."

At this moment the landlord approached the young men bowing obsequiously.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I am your humble servant, and my poor inn is honored by the presence of two such gentlemen, for I have just learned your names and rank from Lady Vernon's page."

"Oh," answered Manners, "we are merely here to enjoy the beauty of the Peak country, and would desire to remain unknown."

"The fortune that has brought you to my poor inn has opened the gates of Haddon to

you," pursued the innkeeper, "and you will gaze on the beauty of Haddon's daughters."

"Is Mistress Dorothy betrothed, too?" inquired Aleyne, with a mischievous glance at his companion.

"Well, rumor has it that she will wed Sir Falconer Bracebridge."

"Sir Falconer Bracebridge!" echoed Manners in surprise.

"Ay, sir; know ye anything of him?"

"Well, not much to his credit." The innkeeper showed some annoyance.

"Sir Falconer is a worthy gentleman," he said, with some heat, "and a good patron of mine. He is clever, too."

"Ay, in deceit," said Manners.

"Come, come," said Aleyne interposing, for he saw mischief might arise from this too free expression of opinion of Manners' part, "let's not argue on a day like this. Fetch us another jug of ale, landlord, for my throat is dry." With a frown on his face the man went off, and Aleyne turned to his friend. "Jack," he said, "you must keep a guard on your tongue or it will lead you into trouble. Mine host, I think, is not to be trusted, and if he reports this to Bracebridge it may cause trouble."

"I cannot help that," replied Manners,

“and much I wonder that he is permitted to pay court to Dorothy Vernon. Surely his character is not known to Sir George Vernon.”

“Hush, man, what is Dorothy Vernon to you that you should concern yourself with her affairs?”

“True, true,” replied the young man, thoughtfully, as if some foreboding of what the future held for him was troubling him, “she is nothing to me now, but to mate with Sir Falconer Bracebridge! It is shameful.”

A little later the two friends set out for the Hall, and they had just slowed up their steeds to gaze on the picture the mansion presented, as it reflected the golden rays of the sinking sun, when a woman suddenly rose in front of their horses, which shied and swerved aside from the strange figure, with a dark skin and a diamond blazing on her forehead. It was Jedaan, the Prophetess.

For a moment the superstition which held peer and peasant in its thrall thrilled the young men with sudden awe, but the fear of the other world was only momentary, and Manners was the first to recover his wits.

“Who are you?” he cried, in angry tones, “and why do you stop us in this unwarranted fashion?”

"I am an Arabian, and have the gift of foretelling what will be," replied Jedaan calmly.

"A pleasant gift, faith," responded Manners, with a skeptical smile. "Come now, we have not time to hear thy prophecy now. To-morrow at noon be at the Boar's Head, and inquire for John Manners and Will Aleyne, and you shall reveal my destiny to me. There is a groat for you in the meantime."

Little was said till they reached the Eagle Tower, where was the principal entrance to Haddon Hall.

The herald's trumpets had proclaimed that the feast was ready, and those who were privileged to sit above the salt had formed in line on each side of the great ballroom waiting for the host and his family to lead the way. John Manners and his friend stood together, and as Dorothy Vernon and her stepmother came up the room, Dorothy, by accident, let her handkerchief fall. Manners immediately stooped, and restored the handkerchief with such a graceful bow that the young lady's attention was arrested. Their eyes and hands met as Dorothy accepted the handkerchief with a smile and a word of thanks, and as she passed on, she turned her head for an instant, and glanced back at the young man.

"Who is that gallant?" she whispered to her stepmother.

"I know not, child," replied Lady Vernon, unamiably; "some graceless loon whom your father's weakness has brought here."

Dorothy was hurt by the allusion to her father, and held her peace.

For some seconds after Dorothy had passed, Manners could do nothing but gaze at the vision which had risen before his eyes.

"For once rumor hath not lied," he whispered to Aleyne when he found his tongue. "The fair Dorothy Vernon is lovelier even than report painted her."

Aleyne laughed.

"Smitten already, Jack!" he said, "but remember I have warned you."

Manners made no reply, and his silence continued all the time of the banquet till the ladies retired.

When Sir George Vernon rose at midnight to quit the banqueting hall, the two young men followed him to take their leave.

"Nay, my friends," said their host, genially, "you must not ride away at such an hour, if you will deign to accept my hospitality."

Manners looked at his friend, and then ac-

cepted for both with an eagerness that might have attracted attention at any other time, for Dorothy's sweet face still haunted him.

CHAPTER III.

DOROTHY VERNON.

The sunlight was streaming in at the window next morning when he awoke, and making a hasty toilet wandered into the gardens, with Dorothy Vernon's face still haunting his waking dreams.

He had reached the broad upper terrace when, suddenly, a silvery voice broke on his ear, and, turning, he saw the object of his dreams in the lawn garden accompanied by an old woman and two spaniels.

Impulsively, Manners was about to descend the broad steps to the lawn, when he checked himself. What right had he to intrude on this young lady's privacy? He was only the guest of an hour.

He was turning away when the two spaniels suddenly spied him, and flew up the steps at the stranger, snapping and barking at him as if they intended to quite make an end of him.

"Come here, you ungracious creatures,"

cried Dorothy in evident distress at the unruliness of the dogs. Don't be alarmed, sir, they are not dangerous." Manners smiled and bowed, and, descending the steps, said, with a laugh:

"In truth, my lady Dorothy, I am afraid I must put myself under your protection from these ferocious beasts."

"Nay, they are only frolicsome. Is it not so, Madge?"

"Ay, sweet one," replied the old woman, "but ill-mannered and spoiled."

The old woman, Dorothy's nurse and waiting woman, worshiped the ground the girl trod on. From her girlhood she had been in the service of the Vernon family, and was devoted to every member of it, with the exception of Lady Vernon, whose harshness to Dorothy she resented.

"Then I am grateful for their ill manners, since it has given me the opportunity to pay my respects to the charming daughter of my honored host."

Dorothy blushed crimson, and, stooping to adjust the collar of one of the dogs, said softly: "May I know the name of my father's guest, who seems so well versed in the art of flattery?"

"It is one, lady, of which I have no need to be ashamed. I am plain John Manners, second son of the Earl of Rutland."

Dorothy looked up, and extended her shapely hand to him, which he kissed with, perhaps, a little more warmth than was necessary.

"I am pleased to know you, sir, and I have heard of your worthy father. Stay you long with us?" she added.

"Alas, no!" he answered with a sigh. "My friend, Will Aleyne, and myself are traveling through the Peak country, and would have left Bakewell last night had your father not detained us."

"Brief as your visit is, I would like you to take away a good impression of Haddon Hall. If it would not weary you, I should be pleased to show you the gardens and the view of the Hall that is to be got from the upper terrace."

"My lady Dorothy," replied Manners, a look of unspeakable delight illumining his face, "I should, indeed, be a churl if I were wearied by aught you might say or do."

"A noble speech, sir," chimed in old Madge. "Now, Mr. Manners, have you ever seen a sweeter maid than my Dorothy?"

"By the book, no!" exclaimed Manners, enthusiastically.

"Peace, sir," said Dorothy sternly, "I'll hear no more of your flattery." With crimson face she called her dogs, and fled like a startled fawn to the upper terrace.

"After her, sir!" cried Madge. "She is bashful, and likes not to hear her praises sung. Go to her and I will follow."

Needing no second bidding, he rushed up the steps, and overtook the young lady.

"Mistress Dorothy," he said, "I claim the fulfillment of your promise to show me the view of which you spoke."

"Nay, this is too much, sir. You abuse the hospitality of my father."

Manners dropped on his knees, and, bowing his head, said dolefully:

"Mistress Dorothy Vernon, by the sun that shines upon us, I vow that I will not quit this spot till you have pardoned me for the dreadful crime of admiring you."

"Was ever maiden so persecuted," sighed Dorothy. "Shame on you for taking advantage of my maiden weakness. But I suppose I must forgive you. Now, rise and go. I am to blame for having drawn you into speech with me."

Manners, who had sprung gayly to his feet on hearing her words of forgiveness, was dum-

founded by the sudden change in her manner. He tried to stammer an excuse as she moved away, but, as she made no response, there was no help but to depart crestfallen.

A week had passed since the betrothal feast at Haddon Hall, and still John Manners and his friend lingered at Bakewell, much to the annoyance of Aleynes, who was eager to resume his travels. The day following the feast Jeddan, the seer, had come to the Boar's Head in accordance with Manners's invitation. The young man showed an extraordinary eagerness to hear what the weird woman had to tell him, and the strangely assorted pair left Aleynes to his own cynical meditations, while they adjourned to a separate room. Jeddan, having darkened the window, spread a chocolate-colored powder on a plate, and set fire to it.

From the burning powder arose a thin bluish vapor, which curled and twisted and spread till it obscured from the young man's gaze the opposite wall of the room.

"What do you see?" said Jeddan, ceasing the low, monotonous chant she had kept up while the powder was burning.

"A human face," replied Manners. "Ah, it is Dorothy Vernon!"

"How does she look?"

"Sad. The eyes are wistful, and they fill with tears. It is gone," he added regretfully.

Jedaan, again approaching Manners, made several passes with her hands before his face, and threw more powder into the dish.

The cloud of vapor increased, and a new picture gradually grew out of the curling wreaths of smoke.

"I see a moonlit road," went on John Manners, "and two figures on horseback, riding as if for their lives. One of the figures is that of a woman, but her face is muffled. The other is a man—myself, I'll swear! Behind are pursuing shadows, phantoms of angry men with naked swords in their hands. The shadows make up on the pursued rapidly, and the foremost strives to strike me with his sword. Ah!"

The sudden exclamation was elicited by the disappearance of the smoke picture.

"What does all this mean?" continued John Manners, almost fiercely, turning to Jedaan, but no answer was vouchsafed him. Dazed for a moment, he stared around him, and awoke to the consciousness that the room was filled with a stifling odor, and that the weird woman was stretched on the floor, dead, for all he could tell. He rushed to the window, and,

throwing it open, turned his attention to the prophetess.

She stirred when he touched her, and opened her eyes. Very soon she had recovered sufficiently to enable her to move out of the heavy atmosphere of the chamber, and reply to the youth's eager questioning as to the meaning of the vision. But only one answer would she give. "What you have seen will be," and with this he had to be content.

Day after day passed, and the two young men lingered on at the Boar's Head in Bake-well, Aleyne getting daily more impatient, and his friend, no doubt influenced by Jedaan's necromancy, loitering merely on the chance of getting another glimpse of Dorothy Vernon.

Mounting his steed one morning, he was riding along near the great gateway, when the sound of a horn and voices aroused him from his reverie, and looking ahead he beheld a lady accompanied by a cavalier and followed by two attendants. Manners drew his horse under a tree, for he recognized Dorothy Vernon. As she came abreast of where he stood she suddenly caught sight of him, and became so confused that she let her riding whip fall. Manners sprang from his horse, picked up the whip, and presented it to her as he doffed his

hat and bowed. She stammered her thanks, passed on, and Manners stood gazing after her, and heard the cavalier, who was Bracebridge, ask sternly :

“ Who is this gallant? You seem to know him, my dear Dorothy.”

“ A week ago he was my father’s guest,” she answered.

“ Aye, aye ; but his name? ”

“ Manners.”

“ What? John Manners, son of the Earl of Rutland? ”

Doll nodded an assent.

“ Oh, oh ! but this is fortunate. I have a score to settle with that evil-tongued rascal, and by the Virgin I’ll teach him a lesson he’ll long remember ! ”

Fortunately Manners did not hear the conversation, or he would have hurried after the party, and demanded an explanation. What he did was to return to the inn and announce to his friend that he was ready to depart at once.

CHAPTER IV.

A DUEL TO THE DEATH.

Their road next morning lay through Rowsley, as they intended to ride to Derby that day.

Soon they were traversing the beautiful and romantic Darley Dale, and so they came to Darley village, where a picturesque inn with a broad bowling green tempted them to halt, drink a horn of ale, and play a game of bowls. While mine host had gone to his cellar to tap a fresh barrel John Manners strolled to the little church on the other side of the road, with its quiet God's acre, and flinging himself down he indulged in reverie, and dreamed waking dreams of Dorothy Vernon. He lay there some little time dreaming his dreams until recalled to a sense of his mundane surroundings by the sound of galloping horses, and looking along the road which he and his friend had traversed he beheld three horsemen riding hard through a cloud of dust.

The three riders drew rein when they got abreast of the inn so suddenly as nearly to throw their steeds on their haunches. They were gentlemen as evidenced by their dress and swords. They were hot and dust covered, while their horses were flecked with foam. On the stone bench in front of the inn Aleyne and the two servants sat.

"What ho, fellows!" cried one of the horse-men abruptly, a florid-faced man, "have you seen two cavaliers pass, gentlemen of some quality?"

"Whom is it you seek?" asked the servant.

"One John Manners, who rides with a knave no less scurvy than himself."

The servant stood up and answered boldly:

"My master is John Manners, a very honest gentleman, and no scurvy knave, as you are pleased to call him."

The florid-faced man flung himself from his horse, his example being followed by his companions.

"What ho, tapster!" he roared in blustering tones. "Send your hostler to our steeds. I have a score to settle with one of your customers."

"I would humbly crave to know your name and quality, sir," said the landlord, looking a

little scared at the prospects of a quarrel.

“I am Sir Falconer Bracebridge, knight,” came the proud answer. “My friend here is Sir Ralph Bardsdale, knight, of Norwich, Cheshire; and that gentleman is my esquire.”

“And whom seek you, sir?” asked the host.

“One John Manners, a knave, who with false tongue hath beslandered my fair name, and he must answer to me with his life.”

Bracebridge was in the habit of frequenting the Boar’s Head at Bakewell, and as he was an influential patron the landlord did not fail to report to him Manners’ disparaging remarks, and when Bracebridge met John in the woods near Haddon, and noticed that Dorothy was confused his jealous nature was aroused, and he resolved to pick a quarrel with his rival on the first opportunity. The day following that meeting Hubert Armstrong conveyed a secret message to Bracebridge that Manners and his friend had left, and were on their way to London. In consequence of this Bracebridge had set off in pursuit, overtaking his enemy at Darley village.

John Manners, who heard what passed between the fire-eater and the landlord of the inn, came forward, and with a dignified bow he answered for himself:

"I am John Manners, second son of the Earl of Rutland, and at your service."

Bracebridge grew red in the face, and with a passionate gesture, cried:

"If you are John Manners then I charge you with being a false and perjured slanderer."

"On what authority?" asked Manners, coolly and proudly.

"On the authority of one Hubert Armstrong, host of the Boar's Head at Bakewell. Answer you to the point: has Hubert Armstrong spoken truly or falsely, when he reports that you have defamed me?"

"If Armstrong has reported me as saying that you have a reputation for being clever in deceit, and that you are a dicer and a trickster, then he has reported me truly."

Bracebridge's face became scarlet, and the veins in his forehead seemed to swell up.

"Then," he cried in a towering rage, "you shall make good your words on your sword, and as he spoke the words he flung his riding glove in Manners' face."

Aleyne, who had been a silent spectator, started up at the first indication of the quarrel, but held his peace, waiting for developments, though keenly alive to the seriousness of the situation.

As the glove of the challenger fell to the ground Manners kicked it away disdainfully, and flinging his hat on the bench he drew his sword, and said with a sneer:

“You shall have your revenge, and Mistress Dorothy Vernon shall be freed from the possibility of becoming wife to such as you, who are not fit to fasten the latchet of her shoe.”

Nothing that Manners could have said or done could have aroused the fury of Bracebridge as this did.

He made a desperate lunge at his antagonist, who skillfully parried the thrust, however, and at that moment Aleyne, whose feelings got the better of him, fearing as he did that his friend would be sacrificed, struck up their swords with his own, and exclaimed:

“Hold! This is an outrage, and I implore you put up your weapons, and let me decide between you.”

Young Bardsdale here threw himself into the breach.

“Thy name and rank?” he demanded, as he drew his sword.

“My name is William Aleyne, Esquire. And thine?”

“Sir Ralph Bardsdale, son of Sir Hope Bardsdale of Northwich, Cheshire.”

“Defend yourself then, Sir Ralph, for my friend’s quarrel is mine also,” said Aleyne.

The four men now fell to in deadly earnest, and for some minutes the swordsmen fought with dogged determination and admirable skill.

Some chance remarks from the crowd falling on Bardsdale’s ears so wounded his vanity and stirred his passion that he made such a furious onslaught on his foe that Aleyne nearly lost his footing, and could do nothing but guard himself. At last, however, he recovered his position, and by a very skillful blow he slightly wounded the bloodthirsty young duelist in the shoulder.

“First blood,” cried Aleyne, “and since you and I have no just cause of quarrel, let’s put up our swords.”

Infuriated as he was Bardsdale was in no humor to listen to reason, and smarting from the prick he had received, he lost all control of himself, till Aleyne saw at last that it would be necessary to disable his youthful opponent, and he determined to wound him in the sword arm, but Bardsdale made a sudden lunge and rush; the lunge was parried, then Aleyne

thrust, and the other failing to guard himself, the point of the weapon entered deeply into his chest, and piercing the heart he fell back with a gurgling cry. He was instantly picked up, laid on the bench, while every effort was made to stanch the flow of blood.

In the meantime Manners and Bracebridge had been striving might and main for mastery. At length, by splendid sword play, with a lightning-like movement, Manners got under his antagonist's guard, and came near piercing him through the heart, but Bracebridge managed to knock up the sword, but was slightly wounded in so doing. Unfortunately for himself in making the thrust Manners trod on a small stone, which threw him off his balance, and that was his undoing. Bracebridge saw his opportunity, and was not slow to avail himself of it. Recovering his weapon he made a powerful thrust, and ran his opponent through the shoulder. Manners' sword fell from his hand, and he would have gone to the ground if his servant had not rushed forward and caught him.

So ended the combat. The arrival of a skilled woman and her examination of young Bardsdale left no room to doubt that he was beyond the reach of all human aid.

The sun had set, and the village slept, but from a latticed window of an upper chamber of the hostelry a light streamed. In that chamber lay John Manners grievously wounded, while distressed and sorrow-stricken his faithful friend, William Aleyne, sat and watched. Presently he was startled, and the echoes of the village were awakened by a loud knocking on the door, and the voice of a woman crying for admittance.

CHAPTER V.

MADGE UTTERS A WARNING.

Sir Falconer Bracebridge did not convey the body of his friend Bardsdale back to Had-don, but lodged it at Rowsley for the night. Here also he had the slight wound on his arm attended to, and that done he proceeded to the Hall, where, seeking a private interview with Sir George Vernon, he broke the news to him. Of course, he made the best he possibly could of his own case, representing Manners as being "a graceless fellow, of such free speech and so loose-tongued that he not only slandered the fame of honest gentlemen but of fair women. My own reputation having suffered grievous wrong by this slanderer, as testified by mine host of The Boar's Head at Bakewell, honor demanded that I should challenge him. And when I heard that he had sneaked away from fear of meeting me, I rode after him and laid him low."

"But is he dead?" asked Sir George Vernon, in evident distress.

“I know not; but I cut him down, and I think he will hardly wield sword again.”

Sir George took a far more serious view of the matter than Bracebridge was disposed to do, and expressed grave fears that the powerful Manners family would not let the affair rest where it was. He deplored such a hasty appeal to arms, when explanation might have set matters right; and he confessed that, from what little he had seen of Manners, he had been rather impressed with him.

Bracebridge did not like to hear this praise of his rival, and he spared no invective that was likely to tell in his own favor, referring to Manners as “a brawler” and “a heretic.” Whether or not Sir George was impressed by this line of argument did not appear, for he preserved a diplomatic silence.

A little later Bracebridge sought Dorothy, to take his leave of her. She seemed surprised at his sudden departure, and naturally inquired the cause of it. Needless to say, he did not satisfy her curiosity, and the only explanation he ventured to give was that an affair of some importance necessitated his going into Cheshire as soon as possible.

If he supposed that Dorothy would weep and wail at his going, he befooled himself

greatly. Indeed, though she concealed it, she experienced a sense of relief. And when she mounted to the summit of the tower to wave an adieu to him, she did not look like a young lady who was steeped in woe because her lover was going away.

The day had not run to finish before old Madge was in possession of the news which was being discussed by the servants. It had been brought to the Hall by a butcher who supplied the family with "small meat"; but he was not in a position to say whether John Manners was fatally hurt or not. His information was that there had been a fierce encounter at Darley between some gentlemen, that one was killed, and that Master Manners had been worsted by his opponent. When Madge, with eager interest, inquired the cause of the quarrel, Will Dawson, the head forester, who had been bringing in fagots, said:

"I know not the cause, good nurse, of this sword-pricking and blood-spilling, but I'll wager my year's wage there's a woman at the bottom of it."

"You know nothing about it, Will Dawson. But come hither; I should like to speak a word to you privately. I am eager to know how it fares with this John Manners, who, if

report lies not, hath been so grievously hurt by the fiery Sir Falconer Bracebridge. I have a crown to spare, and 'tis yours for the earning."

"Say how I can earn it, good Madge, and the crown is mine."

"'Tis easily earned. Tell not your business to anyone, but ride hard to Darley and bring me a report of John Manners. And mark you, Will, let it be a true report, even though it tells of his death. You understand?"

"Ay, clearly," replied Will Dawson, and within half an hour he was riding at full speed to Darley.

A hawking party had been arranged for that day, but Sir George Vernon had canceled it on account of the tragedy; and when Madge went to Dorothy's room, she was questioned as to the cause of the hawking party being put off.

"Is it because Sir Falconer has departed?" asked Dorothy.

"I should think not, love-bird. Did Sir Falconer say nothing to you before he went?"

"Oh, much," laughed Doll. "He said I was to dream of him. Why, Madge, if I were to dream of him I should frighten you, because you would think I had a nightmare."

"You would rather dream of handsome young Manners, eh?"

"Heigho!" sighed Dorothy, as she leaned out of her window, and expressed a fear that there was going to be a change of weather.

"Would you like news of Manners?" asked the old nurse.

"Well, truth to tell, I have a woman's curiosity," she said indifferently. "Do you know what has become of him?"

"Ay."

"Oh, tell me, tell me," cried Dorothy, with an eagerness that could scarcely have been the outcome of mere curiosity, and was not in keeping with her assumed indifference.

"He is lying grievously wounded at Darley."

"Grievously wounded," echoed Doll, with a little catching of her breath.

"So runs the report."

"Who has wounded him?"

"The man to whom your lady mother would wed you."

"What? Sir Falconer?"

"Ay, Sir Falconer."

Dorothy seemed dumfounded for the moment, and her pretty face was clouded with a look of sadness. Presently she spoke:

“ Madge, what was the cause of the quarrel? ”

“ I know not; but if I said that you were, maybe I should not be far wrong.”

“ I the cause? ” cried Doll. Then, with an angry flash of her eyes, she asked: “ Think you, Madge, that John Manners has dared to speak ill of me? ”

“ No, my baby, I think not so. A man does not speak ill of the woman he admires.”

“ But how do you know that Manners admires me? ” asked Doll coyly.

“ Baby, dear, I know it by the way John Manners looked at you, and the way John Manners sighed, and by the woe in his face when you pretended to be very angry and sent him from you.”

Dorothy remained wrapped in thought for some minutes, but presently she looked up into the kindly face, and, twining her white arms about Madge’s neck, she asked:

“ Has Sir Falconer departed because of this quarrel? ”

“ When he came to the Hall this time he brought a friend with him,” remarked Madge.

“ Ay, Sir Ralph Bardsdale.”

“ Well, Sir Ralph Bardsdale is dead, so runs the news.”

"Dead!" exclaimed Dorothy in a tone of horror, as she clapped her hands to her temples; "dead! And killed by John Manners?"

"Not by Manners, as I am told, but his friend. The gossip is that Sir Falconer set upon Manners, and when William Aleyne took his part Sir Ralph set upon Aleyne, who slew him. 'Tis an awful business, and Sir Falconer Bracebridge carried the body into Cheshire to the boy's home."

"Oh, Madge! Madge!" moaned Dorothy in real distress; "but this is woeful news indeed, and I fear it will lead to grave consequences."

"If it frees thee, my sweet child, from the prospects of an odious marriage, then I say 'tis well. You are too gentle, and sweet and beautiful for such as Sir Falconer. Let him seek a lady of his own fiber, and not wed with one who would wither under his angry looks."

Dorothy was so upset that she wept. She had a high regard for the old woman's perspicacity and shrewdness, and in her heart she was perfectly well aware that Madge was right. She had tried to deceive herself, but Madge's little outburst of plain speaking had convinced her that the trial was a failure, and now this terrible news of the fight and its tragic

consequences caused her to shrink within herself and experience a sense of dread of the man who was to be her husband. That surely was an outrage on natural feeling, and not the spirit in which she should be wooed and won. When her tears had spent themselves Doll sank into a deep reverie, which old Madge did not disturb, but busied herself with some trifling duties, until, suddenly looking up, Dorothy asked dreamily, and as if the matter didn't very greatly interest her :

“ I wonder if the young gentleman who was wounded by Sir Falconer was hurt to death? ”

“ You will soon have your question answered, since Will Dawson has gone to Darley, and is to bring us news,” replied Madge.

CHAPTER VI.

DAWSON BRINGS BAD NEWS.

The woman who disturbed the midnight silence of Darley by clamoring at the door of the hostel for admission while Manners lay wounded sorely, and his devoted friend, Aleyne, watched by his bedside, was no other than Jedaan, the seer. A pedlar passing through Darley on his way to Bakewell had gathered the news, and spread it as he went, and Jedaan heard from the pedlar of the fight and its results, with keen interest, for there is little doubt she had faith in her own prophecies. Apart from that, Manners had won her sympathy and good-will by the kindly way he had treated her.

Parting from the pedlar, she wended her way toward Darley, and a little distance out of Rowsley met the procession bringing in the body of Bardsdale. She loitered about until an opportunity occurred for her to address herself to Sir Falconer Bracebridge, when she

begged that she might be allowed to forecast his future. At any other time he would have humored her; but now he was filled with grief for the death of his friend, and disturbed in his mind as to the possible consequences to himself for his rashness. Accordingly Sir Falconer spurned her, and when, undeterred by his savage mood, she importuned him, he told his esquire to beat her with the flat of his sword. Had he known what a deadly enemy this strange woman could be he would probably have hesitated before insulting her. Jedaan's mobile face betrayed the emotions of her mind, and her dark eyes glowed like those of an angry tigress. But she remained silent, though, raising her hand, she drew imaginary figures in the air, until some of the loiterers jeered at her and called her "witless."

The moon was pouring a flood of light over the landscape when she came to Darley, and saw the light streaming from the window of the room where Manners lay. She clamored for admittance, until mine host, irritated at being disturbed from his rest, armed himself with a ponderous cudgel, and, from an open window, demanded to know who it was who thus disturbed the peace of the night.

"Give me admission," demanded Jedaan im-

peratively, "that I may bring comfort to the wounded gentleman who lies under this roof."

Bidding her wait until he had donned some clothes, the host disappeared, and, unbarring the heavy door, he admitted Jedaan, though he was not a little startled as the gleam from his lantern revealed the strange, weird figure of his visitor.

"Know you the hurt gentleman?" he asked in some trepidation.

"Ay; conduct me to him at once," was Jedaan's answer, uttered in a stern and commanding tone.

The simple countryman was awed, and, with trembling hand and chattering teeth, he held his lantern aloft, and guided her up the narrow stairs to the room where Manners lay.

Manners, who was suffering much pain, was amazed at Jedaan's unexpected appearance, an amazement that was shared by Aleyne, who had been dozing as he sat, but started into full wakefulness as the woman entered.

"The day has had its surprises," said Manners with a wan smile, "and the night is not behind the day. Why come you at such an hour, Jedaan?"

"To give you comfort."

"I need it," he answered, lightly, "for my

life ebbs, and before to-morrow's sun has set I shall have passed to the life eternal."

"Have I not told you your future?" asked Jedaan solemnly.

"Ay, you have so told me; but my faith is weak."

"Let it be strong again, then, for I tell you your time of departure is not yet. Let me see your wound."

Manners was reluctant to do this; but Jedaan declared that her own skill in the treatment of wounds was not inferior to a surgeon's, and mayhap superior. Moreover, as she urged, to wait for a surgeon in such cases was dangerous, and she was sure she could give him ease and sleep, which would lessen the chance of a fever.

Her argument told and her manner impressed so that the suffering man yielded himself to her. He had been pierced on the top of the chest, on the left side, close to the shoulder joint, and had lost a great deal of blood. With extraordinary dexterity and delicacy of touch she removed his bandages, and examined the wound with a critical eye.

"'Tis a clean wound," she said, "though a painful one; and, as there has been no blood

from thy mouth, thou wilt be but little the worse for this sword prick."

From under her petticoat she produced a small bag of untanned leather. The contents of the bag were of a miscellaneous character. There were phials filled with colored liquids, some white flax, a metal box containing a green ointment, and what seemed to be pieces of bark of the alder or willow tree. Having cleansed the wound with water from a ewer that stood on a table, she poured from one of her phials a few drops of lotion into it. Next, she soaked a pad of the flax with some other lotion, and, drawing the lips of the wound together, she cleverly bound the flax on it with a piece of bark straightened out.

The dressing completed, she prevailed upon Manners to swallow a portion of the contents of another of her phials, and then she sat down to watch the effect of her treatment. In about a quarter of an hour the injured man showed every symptom of extreme drowsiness, and in another quarter of an hour he was sleeping calmly and naturally. Then telling Aleyne to get rest, she coiled herself up in a corner of the room, wrapped her scarf about her head, and slumbered soundly.

It will be remembered that Will Dawson, the

head woodsman at Haddon, prompted by the large reward of a crown which was offered by Madge for news of the wounded man, had set off on his errand in the course of the afternoon, and, avoiding the road by keeping to the woods, through which he could have found his way blindfolded, he came to Darley, where he was well known. He had a chat with the blacksmith and cobbler, and with other gossips also, and, as each one had his own and different version of the affair, the news-gatherer was somewhat confused. But there was a consensus of opinion that the "poor young gentleman" who was lying at the inn was "wounded unto death." And, finally, when Will, over a jack of foaming October, discussed the matter with mine host, that worthy gave such a lugubrious account of the condition of his guest, and protested so emphatically that the "dying man" must not be disturbed, that Dawson felt there was no longer any ground to hope that "Master Manners" would live, but the wound being of such a nature the rising sun would find him a corpse.

Thus it was that when, late in the day, Madge went to Dorothy's chamber to bid her good-night she said sadly:

"Will Dawson has returned, sweet one, and,

though he hath muddled his brains with ale, he tells a clear story."

"Yes, yes!" cried Dorothy with great eagerness, as the nurse paused in her speech.

"The poor young gentleman, as it seems, has received a fatal hurt, and lies a-dying," said Madge dolefully. "May the saints receive him."

Dorothy gave a start.

"Poor young gentleman!" she said fervently. "God pity him! How sad! how sad!"

CHAPTER VII.

A LOWLY DIPLOMATIST.

It is not difficult to understand that even at a period when encounters were frequent, the fight at Darley caused a good deal of excitement throughout the county. There were circumstances in connection with it that gave it an interest often lacking in such cases. Of course, there were many versions of the story, for accurate news was difficult to get; but the generally accepted one was that the combat had been between rivals for the hand of one of Derbyshire's most beautiful women. This caused Sir George Vernon very great annoyance, and he did his best to counteract it by causing a public announcement to be made that the quarrel was between Sir Falconer Bracebridge and Mr. John Manners, owing to the latter having attacked the reputation of Sir Falconer in a hostelry.

The feelings of Lady Matilda may perhaps be far better imagined than described, and she

railed against Manners in terms that would hardly have been justified had he been a common adventurer. She declared that he had brought bad luck to the house; and that the beautiful harmony that had hitherto prevailed had been entirely disturbed by him. Needless to say that Dorothy fell under the lady's deep displeasure, for, with a strangely perverted sense of what constituted right and justice, she blamed Dorothy as being one of the causes that had led to the encounter.

Of course, Sir George Vernon took Doll's part; but this only made matters worse, until it was decided that the subject should be tabooed. For several days after the fatal encounter Dorothy had to keep to her room, or, at the most, could only descend to the terrace for a brief taking of the air. The stepmother was pleased to think that the indisposition was due to a "fretting fever" caused by Sir Falconer's enforced and hurried departure.

Dorothy wisely held her peace, and the Lady Matilda would probably have gone into hysterics had she been told that her stepdaughter was a good deal distressed because she considered she had treated John Manners a little harshly on the occasion of the first and last time of seeing him. This distress was a pure

sentiment due to a belief that Manners was dead, and she did not like the thought that on the eve of his death she had been unkind to a man whose only fault was that he let it be known that he was struck with her beauty. It was not an unnatural sentiment in a young lady of Dorothy's romantic temperament.

A fortnight passed. The excitement died down. Haddon resumed its normal serenity; but the beautiful weather had given place to chill winds and damp atmosphere. Dorothy had quite recovered from her slight indisposition, and was interesting herself immensely in the preparations that had already begun for Margaret's wedding. Sir Thomas Stanley had left, and had gone to the Isle of Man, where duty called him, and, as the marriage had been fixed to take place late in the autumn, needlewomen and dressmakers were already busy planning the bride's trousseau, for the trousseau in the case of a lady of her standing was a formidable affair, and generally gave employment to an army of women for months.

"Doll," said Madge one morning when she went into her nursling's chamber, "I have news for you."

"Is't good, nurse?"

"Well, sweet one, it isn't bad."

"Then don't keep me in suspense."

"Guess, my baby, what it is," said Madge with a smile.

"Nay, dear old Madge, don't tease me. Tell me your news, and I will kiss you."

"Well, this is it. Last night when I was at the buttery hatch waiting for my ale Will Dawson came, and he whispered in my ear that he had heard that Master Manners is not dead, after all."

Dorothy visibly started, and the look in her eyes said as plainly as words that the news was welcome news.

"Right glad I am to hear it," she replied, "for at least Sir Falconer Bracebridge has not the death of this poor young gentleman on his soul."

"Oh, it is of Sir Falconer's soul you think," cried Madge slyly; and then, with some warmth, she added: "But Master Manners owes no thanks to Sir Falconer for his life. I'll wager that had Sir Falconer had his will there would have been little life left in Manners."

"I fear 'tis so," murmured Dorothy with a sigh. "But Manners lives, if your news be true, and may God keep him in the future!"

"Amen to that. But would you not like to see this young gentleman again?"

"Wherefore should I wish to see him? He is naught to me nor I to him. I am glad he has escaped with his life; but there my interest ends. You must speak of him no more."

Poor kindly hearted Madge felt rebuked. She had taken a fancy to Manners, and, even from the little she had seen of him, she contrasted him with Bracebridge, to the latter's disadvantage. And she had indulged in a pretty little dream, in which she pictured John Manners and Dorothy Vernon making love to each other. When, therefore, she heard that Manners was likely to recover she had hastened joyfully to Dorothy to convey the information, and to be told now that with his recovery interest ceased was rather a shock to her.

"If your interest ceases, lady-bird," she answered, "the poor young gentleman's may not."

"What mean you, Madge?"

"I mean that perhaps he will think much and long of you to his undoing."

"Was ever such nonsense talked," cried Dorothy. "John Manners goes forth upon his way and I on mine, and there's an end of it."

Dorothy rounded off her speech with a little

sigh, and turned to her mirror to glance at her sweet face. Then Madge stole softly to her, and, passing her arm round her neck, she laid the fair head on her shoulder, and said :

“ Will you answer me one question, lady-bird, truthfully? ”

“ That will I, Madge, if I can. What is it? ”

“ Would you like to see John Manners just once more? ”

“ Nurse, your question is foolish.”

“ Nay, nay, 'tis a fair question, and I have your promise that you would answer it truthfully.”

“ You push me unfairly, Madge,” cried Dorothy petulantly; “ but since it is so, I should like to see John Manners once more, if it were only to give him greetings of his recovery.”

Old Madge smiled. She was conscious of having scored a little triumph, and she was satisfied.

Nurse Madge was illiterate and uneducated; but if Sir George Vernon—the all-powerful king of the Peak—and his lady had been told that this lowly servitor saw more than they, and might change the fortunes of their house, they would have laughed scornfully at the bare

idea. Madge's affection for her "nursling," as she loved to call her, tempted her to do bold things, however, for no other earthly reason than that of assuring Dorothy's interest and happiness, and feeling sure that misery only would come out of an alliance with Bracebridge, she was anxious, if possible, to prevent that alliance from ever taking place. But she herself could never have dreamed that her lowly intriguing would have such tremendous results as those which followed.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN DARLEY DALE.

When John Manners awoke from the refreshing sleep to which Jedaan's care and skill had soothed him he felt another man. His gloomy forebodings had given place to hopefulness, and so deeply impressed was he with the skill of the strange woman that he asked his friend, Aleyne, whether he thought there was any necessity to send to Matlock, as proposed, for the surgeon. Aleyne felt some reluctance to take the responsibility of saying it was not before he had had some conversation with Jedaan, and, as she had disappeared, he went forth to make inquiries about her. He found her in the village surrounded with a little, eager crowd of the simple country folk.

Jedaan managed, after a little, to escape from her audience, and converse with Aleyne, to whom she pledged her assurance that she could cure his friend of his wound, and that she would depart if the surgeon was sent for.

In the end Manners decided to trust himself entirely to her care; and, as he now felt convinced that in his case no vital organ was injured, although the wound was deep and painful, he was content that she should attend to him. She rewarded this confidence by unremitting attention, and at the end of a week he was allowed to get up, and sit in the sunshine on the bowling green or in front of the hostelry, according to his fancy. Jedaan, however, was careful to bind his arm with bandages to his side, so that he could not move it, lest, as she said, the bleeding might start afresh.

As Manners was now anxious about his people, fearing that exaggerated reports would reach them, and throw them into a state of anxiety and alarm, he dispatched his willing friend Aleyne to them, and requested him to say that his "accident" was but a trifling affair, and though it had laid him up for a little while he was speedily recovering; that he intended to continue his journey, and hoped to visit the forests of Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire before returning.

So William Aleyne set forth upon his journey, and Manners promised to remain until he should return, and vowed he would defend him with sword and purse should any trouble arise

out of the death of Bardsdale, which was not improbable if the young man's people had wealth and influence, although he was the challenger, and had been killed in fair fight.

Of course, Manners was in entire ignorance of the extraordinary interest that old Madge took in his welfare. Will Dawson on the occasion of his first visit carried back a report that the wounded man would not survive; but subsequent visits led to a modification of this, and finally to an assurance that all was well, and the invalid was rapidly recovering.

One day it chanced when Dawson had come to the hostelry Manners passed him on his way to a favorite seat under a spreading tree at the corner of the house.

Dawson touched his cap to Manners, who, struck by the forester's splendid physique and sturdy independence of manner, readily entered into conversation with him. And when he learned that he was head forester to Sir George Vernon his interest increased tenfold, and he plied the forester with questions about the family, and Dorothy in particular. Honest Will Dawson was confused and agitated by having the honor of talking to this gentleman of quality, the son of an Earl; and when Master John Manners pressed a guinea upon him

Will Dawson's bewilderment deprived him of speech altogether.

An hour later, as Dawson stood by his horse, ready to mount and ride home, and having recovered from the confusion into which Manners' generosity and condescension had thrown him, he said with a profound obeisance:

"Sir, I am your humble servant, and if you would deign to intrust me with any message to be delivered at Haddon it shall be truly and secretly given."

John looked at the speaker, and hesitated; then said:

"A thousand thanks, but I am a stranger. Why, then, should I send messages?"

"I know not, sir," said Will as he got into the saddle, "but if you will pardon my freedom of speech, I thought you would command me to bespeak you well to Mistress Dorothy."

John rose from his seat, patted the neck of Dawson's horse, and looked into the man's face. "Think you, Dawson," he asked, "that Mistress Dorothy has heard of my encounter with Sir Falconer Bracebridge?"

"Do I think so, sir? Nay, 'tis common talk at the Hall."

"Do you often get speech with Mistress Dorothy?"

“Only when she rides in the woods or goes a-hawking with my Lord, or takes the air in company with Madge. Ah, sir, she is a sweet lady, and hath no false pride.”

“Truly she is a most sweet lady, Dawson! Now, hark ye, should you have an opportunity of speaking to her soon, say you have talked with the poor gentleman who was wounded, and that he prays for God’s blessings upon her. You need not say more.”

Manners heaved a great sigh, and turned away, and Dawson added:

“By the saints I swear I will also tell her that you sighed as if your own heart were bursting with love of her!”

Manners faced round quickly and half-angrily, but Dawson had dug his heels into the mare’s sides, and was galloping away.

When another few days had passed the young man’s wound, though still tender, was healed, thanks to his own good constitution and Jedaan’s assiduous care. The weird woman felt that her services were no longer required, so left him, amply and generously rewarded for her services. Before parting from him, and as if divining his thoughts, she said:

“Be of good cheer, sir. I have seen your

star at night in the heavens, and it shines with surpassing luster."

"Would that I had faith in all your foretellings," he answered, "but my mind refuses to receive them. My heart is hardened. My star may shine, but I myself am in the dark."

"Fate is fate, and destiny cannot be perverted," was her somewhat mystical reply, as she kissed his hand, said "farewell," and added as the final word, and speaking as one who prophesies: "We shall meet again."

The strange woman had gone, and he was alone, and felt lonelier than ever. Another week was added to the past, and his friend was still absent. The servant had returned, bringing no news, and as the situation had become unbearable Manners resolved to depart, leaving word that he was riding to Derby, and would be found at the hostelry of the "Black Bear." But before he could set out his resolution was suddenly changed by the arrival of Will Dawson. The forester had evidently ridden hard, and, drawing rein in front of the hostelry, he sprang from the saddle and gave the bridle to a hanger-on who was idling about the doorway. Entering the hostelry, he inquired of the landlord for John Manners, who

happened to be giving his servant some instructions.

"Ah, Dawson!" exclaimed John, as he recognized the woodman. "I was about to depart. In another half hour I should have been well advanced upon my journey."

"In which case, sir," answered Will, "I must have sped after you, since I am charged to give a message to you privately."

With curiosity and interest alike aroused, Manners drew the bearer of this important message on one side, and said:

"And now speak your message, for I am all eagerness."

"It is from Nurse Madge, if it please you."

"From Nurse Madge," repeated John with an air of disappointment and disgust.

"Ay, sir; and she bade me speed to you and say that to-morrow at noon she will be riding past the woodman's hut in the lower chase of Haddon on the eastern side."

"But how in the name of common sense does it affect me?" asked the mystified John Manners.

"Nay, I know not, sir, save it be that Mistress Dorothy will be riding with her."

"What a dull-pated ass I am," thought John to himself, "not to have guessed this!"

He questioned no further, and when Dawson had refreshed himself he took his departure.

Left to his own reflections, however, John Manners felt bewildered by the thoughts that crowded through his brains. "Was this a genuine assignation on the part of Madge," he mused, "or a deep-laid scheme against his honor or his safety? If it were the latter, and Bracebridge were at the bottom of the plot, then he would make sure that the hot-tempered knight should not escape a second time."

CHAPTER IX.

AT THE WOODMAN'S HUT.

How slowly and leaden-footed the hours of the night sped away for John Manners. Sleep came to him only in fitful snatches, and during the wakeful intervals the silence and loneliness were well-nigh maddening, for he was on tenter-hooks; his nerves were strung to their fullest tension. One moment it seemed to him he was being made the sport of a cruel destiny; the next, hope filled him with delight, to be succeeded, however, by fits of despair. As the night waned, he sank from sheer exhaustion into a heavy slumber, from which he awoke unrefreshed; and when he glanced into the mirror he was startled to note how dull his eyes were and how deep the shadows beneath.

The morning, like his spirits, was dull and gloomy. A searching wind blew along the valley, tossing the branches of the trees about with a meaningless fury, and raising clouds of dust. The sky was heavy, and there were

signs that presaged rain. Necessarily this was not conducive to John Manners' well-being, for if rain fell it was hardly to be expected that Mistress Dorothy Vernon would ride forth in the woods. And so he watched the lowering sky, and listened to the fiendish screech of the wind in anything but pleasant mood. In his morbid state it seemed as if everybody and everything were conspiring against him.

It was only a little after ten when he mounted his horse to ride to Rowsley. On his way toward Haddon the one figure and subject of his thoughts was Dorothy Vernon. Fool he might be, and a dreamer of impossible dreams, but it was undeniable that for the time being he was completely under the spell of Dorothy Vernon's bewitching beauty.

On reaching Rowsley he stalled his horse at the tavern there, and set forth on foot to the place named by Dawson as the rendezvous. His heart, however, was heavy as lead, for the gloom of the sky had increased, and a coming storm was heralded by big drops of rain.

"She will not come in the rain," he thought, "and I shall not again see her dear, dear, sweet face!"

Nevertheless, he pursued his journey through the Meadow. He did not hurry.

What need was there to hurry? He was even yet in advance of the time named, and in such rain and wind Mistress Dorothy Vernon would not venture forth, but would be snugly housed beneath Haddon's sheltering roof, and bestowing no thought on the foolish gentleman, who was plowing his way over the wet and mossy track in the vain hope of beholding her. Such was his belief, and he railed against Fate, against the weather, against everything, in fact. And though he would go as far as the spot named by Dawson, he had no intention of lingering there. Not he! He would at once hasten back, and that night would sleep in Derby and visit Haddon's Vale no more.

At last the trail he had been following bent at an acute angle upward, and casting his forlorn eyes in the direction in which it trended he beheld the goal—a rustic hut built of gnarled branches, and thatched deeply with straw. Melancholy, indeed, it looked in the gloom that pervaded the forest, and, so far as he could see, no living thing stirred within or without. The ascent was steep, the moss and dead leaves wet and slippery, so that he toiled up with difficulty.

When within a short distance of the hut, a

sound broke upon his ears, a sound that thrilled and startled him. It was a voice.

He paused and listened.

It was a woman's voice, full of rich, sweet tones. The blood quickened in his veins. He heard his heart beat; the pulses in his temples rapped a tattoo. Neither wet moss nor slippery leaves could stay his feet now. He hurried forward, and beheld, sheltering beneath the porch of the hut, Mistress Dorothy Vernon and dear old Nurse Madge.

It is a question whether John Manners or Dorothy Vernon was most confused as their glances met and fell again. And suddenly the gentleman remembered that he must surely appear somewhat draggled, for the wind had battered and the rain had drenched. Therefore he tugged at his doublet, gave his cloak a shake, glanced uneasily at his mud-stained shoes, and saw with dismay that the plumes of his hat were in sorry plight. All this was momentary, he was conscious of bowing very low, and stammering out some pretty fiction about how surprised he was at this unexpected meeting.

Madges eyes twinkled.

"By what strange chance, sir, did you come here on such a day?"

"It was a most kind Fate that surely led me," he answered, as a sigh escaped him.

"It is very strange," said Dorothy, "that you should come at this time. Madge and I rode out to take the air, but the rain fell so persistently that we were driven here for shelter."

Manners had begun to recover his self-possession. "It is dear, dear rain," he said, "since it has enabled me to see you once again, lady. I can now apologize for my rudeness when we last met, and then, when your gracious pardon is bestowed, I will say farewell."

"Are you going away?" she asked quickly, and as if surprised.

"Ay, lady; I think I shall go beyond the seas, and tempt fortune in other lands."

"And pray, sir," demanded Dorothy, "has fortune treated you so badly in this poor country that you feel free to woo her elsewhere?"

He tried to look straight into her eyes, but she averted them hastily. There was such a wistful expression in her soft eyes, that no sweeter picture than she presented could possibly have been imagined. She wore a riding cloak of silver gray, with a hood that, coming up over her head, framed her beautiful

face, until she appeared, to Manners' enraptured gaze, like the realization of some pictured saint. To his eyes never before had woman looked so beautiful, and the admiration he felt displayed itself in his expression. That she read his thoughts, and was conscious of the impression she was making upon him was more than probable, for she suddenly exclaimed, as if desirous of turning the drift of the conversation:

"I ask your forgiveness, Master Manners, that I should have been so forgetful of your health as to fail to ask you how you have been recently?"

"A thousand thanks, sweet lady, for this interest. I am very well."

"And yet I have heard you were severely wounded."

"'Twas but a scratch."

"Then the gossips have lied, for 'twas said that you were sick unto death."

"Death has passed me by and taken better men."

"Say rather that the good God has spared you for better fortune. But I should like to hear from your own lips the cause of quarrel."

"Words, words, my lady," he answered with a smile, "and yet words of grave offense

lightly spoken, against Sir Falconer Bracebridge."

"Tell me, Master Manners," she said with a strange, eager earnestness, "and tell me truly, know you aught of evil against Sir Falconer?"

A pitiable look of despair swept across Manners' face at this question, for it placed him, as it seemed, in an exceedingly awkward and delicate position. Here was an affianced bride asking him if he knew anything evil of the man who stood in the position of her husband-elect. A man less endowed with scrupulous honor than was John Manners might have sought to benefit himself by trying to disgrace his rival, but Manners shrank with an acute sensitiveness from even seeming to do so.

"My Lady Dorothy," he said at last, "Sir Falconer Bracebridge—who as I understand is to be your wedded lord—and I have crossed swords, and a young gentleman has been slain because in idle moments I spoke some ill-considered words."

Dorothy Vernon's face underwent a complete change. She looked stern, commanding, imperious, and when she spoke her tone did not belie her looks.

"Master Manners, you are but juggling with the truth. If your words were without

warrant, then were you guilty of a most wicked act, since one gentleman has been slain by cause thereof, and between you and Sir Falconer bad blood has been begot, the end of which no man can foresee. If, on the contrary, there was warrant for your words, I, as having great interest therein, demand to know your warrant."

In the pitiable dilemma in which he then found himself Manners almost wished that the earth would open and swallow him. He looked round intending to appeal dumbly to the humble Madge in the hope that she might perchance come to his rescue; but the old woman, taking advantage of Manners' and Dorothy's absorption in each other, had slipped away, and gone to where the horses were tethered in a shed at the back of the hut. There she had been joined by Will Dawson, who had come down from the upper wood with a bag of game, and the two were in deep conversation.

At length John Manners rose to the occasion. He could not, and would not, descend to a meanness. Placing his hand upon his heart, and looking into her searching eyes with honest, unwavering gaze, he said with almost ponderous solemnity:

“My Lady Dorothy, I know nothing from personal knowledge of Sir Falconer Bracebridge.”

“Master Manners,” replied Dorothy, almost as solemnly, “it runs that at the Boar’s Head in Bakewell you said that against Sir Falconer which has led to sad shedding of blood. If I read you aright, I am sure you would not say things of such moment without fair warrant. Now, sir, I beseech frankness on your part——”

“But Sir Falconer is to be your lord——”

“What matters it?” she exclaimed with a warmth that startled him. “On your honor, sir, as an honest gentleman, give me the information I seek.”

“You appeal to my honor, lady, and I yield. On many authorities I have heard that Sir Falconer is a dicer, that he is a man of loose habits, that he hath been in many broils by reason of an unhappy temper, and that in his cups he hath been known to speak lightly of the fame of many fair women. These matters, lady, are common talk, and when a man’s reputation is assailed by many it is to be feared that at least a few speak truly. When I allowed my tongue to loosely wag against Sir Falconer I but repeated what men have been

saying this many a day; and I beg you to remember, lady, that I spoke them without prejudice in my own favor, for I knew you not."

Dorothy Vernon shuddered, and for a moment covered her face with her hands as if she were horrified. That she was greatly agitated was obvious, and he was about to say something in the nature of an apology, when she stopped him with a gesture.

"Master Manners, I thank you," she said in a tone that told plainly of emotion, "and I beseech you to summon my nurse."

He looked at her through a mist. So stirred were the depths of his emotion that a watery film gathered in his eyes.

"One word, Lady Dorothy," he cried. "Since we must part to meet no more, say that you do not despise me, that you do not hate me."

Dorothy dare not trust herself to speak. There was a lump in her throat; she felt as if she must weep. She averted her face, and held her hand toward him. In an instant he was on his knee, and, seizing her hand, kissed it again and again. Suddenly she withdrew it as a footstep startled her, and Madge reappeared. She was turning to go again, saying: "Call me, sweet dove, when you are ready," when

Dorothy flung her arms out toward her, and faltered with a choking sob: "Madge, Madge!" The nurse caught her to her bosom, and demanded in fiery tones as she looked at Manners:

"What means this? Have you insulted my sweet child? Thou shalt pay dearly if so. What ho, Will, Will Dawson!"

Dawson came rushing from the shed, and Madge was about to address him, when by a supreme effort Dorothy drew herself up.

"Peace, nurse," she said, "and you, Will Dawson, stand back. Behold, I allow this gentleman to salute my hand. What need you more for answer?" She suited the action to the word, held forth her beautiful hand, and once again Manners pressed his lips to it.

"Forgive me, lady-bird," sobbed dear old Madge, as she used her knuckles to rub the tears from her cheeks. "I thought that Master Manners had angered you. And you, sir, forgive me. Will Dawson, bring the horses, for we must get home. The rain has ceased, but I doubt if it will hold fine for long."

Like one in a dream Manners saw Dawson bring the horses round; like one in a dream he helped Dorothy into her saddle; and long he stood stock still wondering if he had really

heard her whisper: "Ere you go to lands beyond the seas we shall meet again." Had he really seen her just before a bend in the pathway hid her from his view turn and wave her handkerchief to him? How long did he stand there? Was it seconds, minutes, or hours? He knew not. He took no count of time.

The rain was falling again. It dripped and sang Dorothy. The wind talked to the trees, and its theme was Dorothy, and his own heart said "Dorothy" in every beat.

CHAPTER X.

A LETTER FROM BRACEBRIDGE—DOROTHY'S
DESPAIR.

That fateful meeting at the woodman's hut in Haddon Chase between Dorothy Vernon and John Manners was due entirely to the scheming of Nurse Madge, who, humble and lowly though she was, had, by a freak of chance, become the shaper of the destinies, so to speak, of the house of her master, and the house of Manners. This faithful old nurse had seen many would-be wooers come buzzing around her "most sweet child," and she had approved of none of them; but when John Manners came before her something in his bearing, his looks, his eye, his voice, struck her; arrested her attention, and, by reason of some unerring instinct, or intuitive faculty of appraising the virtue and vices of the opposite sex which she possessed, she pronounced him satisfactory. But even this would not have availed him if her keen old eyes had not de-

tected in her charge signs of admiration of John; for from the first time she first set eyes upon him, Dorothy thought him handsome and attractive; and this determined Madge to take such means as she was capable of commanding to give Dorothy another opportunity of seeing the man who had made such a strange impression upon her. Then Manners had opposed himself to the hectoring Sir Falconer. This caused Madge's dormant sympathies to spring into full activity, and she had maneuvered to bring about that meeting at the woodman's hut.

When Madge and Dorothy rode away after the interview the old woman was a little bit mystified by what she had witnessed, and, as Doll volunteered no explanation, she endeavored to elicit one by asking:

"What do you think now of John Manners, my chick?"

The pale, sweet face had never before, to Madge's knowledge, looked so solemn with thought, or so troubled with some conflicting emotion.

"Oh, don't ask me now, dear nurse," was Dorothy's answer. "My mind is in a whirl."

"Your face is sorrowful, little one," per-

sisted Madge. "John Manners must have dealt unkindly with thee."

An expressive glance from the soft, pensive eyes told her nurse more, perhaps, than even the words that followed did. "John Manners is a true man and an honest gentleman," was Dorothy's response. "But, please," she pleaded, "let me be silent, for indeed I have much to think about."

The nurse questioned no further; and through the pattering rain they pursued the rest of their way in silence. On reaching the Hall, Dorothy was informed that Lady Matilda had been making inquiries for her, and had given word that as soon as she returned she was to attend her Ladyship at once in her room. This message seemed pregnant with coming trouble, and, when the nurse had made her charge presentable, Dorothy prepared to face it. A glance at her stepmother's stern face did not reassure her. The lady was sorting out some threads for tapestry work, but turned as Dorothy entered, and demanded to know how she had been employing her time for the past three hours.

"I was riding in the woods with Madge to take the air."

"A most improper thing to do in such

weather. I should not be surprised if a severe attack of cold should follow.'

"But the rain has not wet me, madam."

"Pray, Mistress Dorothy, what makes you proof against the rain?"

"I mean," explained Doll meekly, "I mean the rain has not wet me to my hurt."

"Oh, oh, you say one thing and mean another. But, seriously, it seems to me that dangers other than from the rain may arise to a well-favored maiden who rides forth alone."

"But Madge accompanied me."

"Pshaw! Madge, forsooth! I do not approve of this wandering forth alone, and I shall urge thy father to give such commands as you will do well to obey in future. For a wandering maiden is never safe from graceless churls who boast in their tavern orgies of their conquests, and speak lightly of the fame of even the most high-born."

Poor Dorothy remained silent. Further argument would only provoke further irritating remarks. "But I have news for you," continued the good lady when she found that Doll held her peace. "Letters have come by special courier from Sir Falconer Bracebridge, who sends loving greetings to you, and in-

quires tenderly for your health and happiness. He speaks of his sorrow for the awful grief of Sir Ralph Bardsdale's mother and father when they received back their dead boy. Indeed, indeed, it rends my heart, oh! to think that this great sorrow should have been brought about by that adventurer, Manners, and his companion. A pest on them both, and on their houses!"

Dorothy's blood boiled; but she restrained herself, for she failed not to see that if she attempted anything in the nature of a defense of Manners it would only bring the storm about her own head.

Lady Vernon waited for an expected outburst, but, none coming, she sullenly went on: "Now, for more pleasant matters of thy future lord's letter. He tells me to convey to you the news that following hard upon his letter he himself will return within a week, and he begs me further to plead with your father that there shall be a formal betrothal and a day of marriage fixed."

Dorothy gave an involuntary start; but Lady Matilda failed to notice it, and continued: "It is a happy thing that so noble a gentleman as Sir Falconer Bracebridge has sought your hand at the very time that we are re-

joicing at our dear Margaret's betrothal. Truly, my lord has cause for congratulation, and you that Heaven has smiled so favorably upon you."

Dorothy's thoughts had been wandering elsewhere, but her stepmother's question recalled her, and though she felt bewildered she gave a clever answer.

"Heaven has smiled upon my sister, and though I have many sins that I pray may be purged away, I know of no such high offense in the sight of Heaven that its smiles should be withheld from me."

"'Tis well said, and as my Lady Bracebridge you will have cause for much thankfulness."

The Lady Vernon, having exhausted her subject, kissed her stepdaughter coldly on the forehead, and dismissed her, much to Dorothy's relief. But so intense had been the strain on the poor girl's feelings, and so overstrung were her nerves, that when she found herself alone in her chamber she shot the bolt of the massive door and wept. The weeping was the natural outcome of all she had gone through.

That same afternoon Lady Vernon approached her husband on the subject of Bracebridge's proposal. Sir George expressed no dis-

approval of the suggested betrothal, but he showed himself averse to an early marriage.

"You must not forget, dame," he urged as a cogent reason for delay, "my daughter Margaret goes from me within the year, and it would rend my heart in pieces if I were to be deprived at the same time of my sweet Doll. A man who gives his daughters in marriage knows that he is opening out for them a new life, but whether for happiness or misery he cannot tell. But he does know this; the going from him of his children takes from him joys that never, never can return. Their departure reminds him that the fires of his life burn low, and soon only the gray ashes will remain."

This little bit of homely and deeply felt sentiment found no echo in his lady's breast. She was artful enough, however, not to attempt to win her lord by counter argument, so she appeared to acquiesce in Sir George's views, though she made a mental resolve that things should be as she desired.

Lady Vernon had yet to learn that there was something in the world stronger than even her imperious will, and more resourceful than her astute diplomacy. Dorothy's fate was sealed as far as she was concerned, but she had forgot that "love laughs at locksmiths," and

that Dorothy was no longer a child. But even Dorothy did not guess the startling and tragic events which lay in the immediate future, and were to exercise such a tremendous influence on her life and that of her family.

CHAPTER XI.

TRAPPED.

John Manners could no longer be in any doubt as to the true state of his feelings for Mistress Dorothy Vernon. The Hand of Destiny had grasped him, and henceforth he would be moved as a piece on a chess-board. In the light of what had transpired at the Woodman's Hut on the day when the rains fell and the winds blew, the prophecies of Jedaan the Gipsy appeared less wild and improbable.

As was only natural, however, his buoyancy and hopefulness underwent a sudden change, and for days he endured that suspense of love which oftentimes is so hard to bear. She had said at the moment of parting, "Before thou goest to lands beyond the sea we shall meet again." What did she mean by that? Surely she would send him a message, a sign. But days came and went, and brought no sign. Thus he alternated between hope and fear; when at last, to his joy and relief, William

Aleyne, returned. He brought with him money and anxious messages, and a firm request that John Manners would depart out of Derbyshire and return to his people.

Aleyne's journey had been uneventful. He had soon told all, and been told in turn of his friend's doings since the parting. Aleyne brought his cool, dispassionate reasoning to bear upon the situation, and this was his judgment.

"It is as clear as daylight that Dawson's coming to you was prompted by the old nurse, who wished to bring you and Mistress Dorothy Vernon together, that she might hear from your own lips the story of your quarrel with Bracebridge, and the causes that led to it. That object being now accomplished, you will hear no more from the lady, and it is now your duty to leave this place and wipe her from your memory."

This advice, on the face of it, was sound, but it was hardly likely to weigh with a man who was drunk with love, and in whose ears still rang the words, "Before thou goest beyond the seas we shall meet again."

"Will, good friend," answered Manners, "I am sure of your friendship, and value your sound sense; but I will depart not out of

Derbyshire until Dorothy Vernon's prediction is fulfilled and we have met again."

Aleyne tried to reason his friend from this determination, but Manners was firm; even urging his friend to go and leave him. But Aleyne said that, as they had set out together, he would remain, for a time at least, in the hope that his friend's "moon madness," as he termed it, would pass away.

It was a somewhat curious thing that on the very day following this discussion Jedaan reappeared with a message from Will Dawson, whom she had met near Haddon. The message was to the effect that at a certain hour two days from then Dawson would be at the hut in the wood, and if Manners would repair there he would receive news. And the woman herself brought news. It was that Sir Falconer Bracebridge was back at Haddon Hall, and that it was rumored among the servants that he and Dorothy were to be married early in the new year.

The fact that a portion of Jedaan's prophecy had already been verified had seriously impressed Manners with a belief in the weird woman's power of piercing the future, and now he pressed her again to tell him more.

"Is it written in the Book of Fate that I

should tempt my fortune by remaining here?" Manners asked Jedaan, after the first shock of her news had passed.

"It is so written," she answered.

"And my heart's desires will find fulfillment?"

"No man reaches the heights at which he gazes," she said, ambiguously, "but be bold, brave, determined, and mayhap thou wilt fall not far short."

With this answer he had to be content, for not another word would she vouchsafe in response to his eager questioning.

On the day appointed for his meeting Dawson at the woodman's hut, John Manners went off full of a burning eagerness to know what the object of the meeting was.

"Ah!" sighed Manners, as he hastened along, "should it chance that Dorothy is at the rendezvous what joy will be mine!"

He reached the hut, and, save for the woodland voices, there was silence and solitude. Seating himself on a fallen tree, he listened and watched; listened for the sound of a silvery voice, watched for the figure of his dreams.

But Dorothy came not, though the burly

woodman, Dawson, did. As he made his obeisance to Manners, he said:

“Nurse Madge bids me convey to you the news that Lady Matilda has set a close watch on Mistress Dorothy of late, and, while Mistress Dorothy desires to see you once more regarding matters about which you gave her information, she is afraid that a meeting is now impossible. Since she considers that there is danger to yourself should you remain in the neighborhood, she begs that you will depart, and she will remember you in her prayers.”

John Manners' heart turned cold, and he was sick with a sense of bitter disappointment.

“To see her no more.” The thought was maddening.

His life in danger! Pooh! What value set he upon his life? If she would but give him an approving smile, whisper a word of love in his ear, he would pit himself against a host of Sir Falconer Bracebridges, and fiery dragons to boot—ay, and slay them all!

“Friend Dawson,” he said, with a familiarity that pleased the woodman, “go to Nurse Madge, and tell her to say to her mistress that my life I value not at a pin's point, and here I will remain until I see her.”

“A bold resolution, sir, but you run much

risk. Sir Falconer Bracebridge, who remains at the Hall, rides and hunts in the woods daily, and he is a fiery-tempered gentleman."

"I care not. But, tell me, Dawson, is it true that Bracebridge is to be openly betrothed to Mistress Dorothy?"

"So says the rumor, sir. But I give you this only as servants' gossip."

"I understand. I have a good mind to go boldly to the Hall and warn Sir George Vernon against his future son-in-law, for I have an implacable hatred of this same Sir Falconer Bracebridge."

"I detest him myself, sir, but if you did what you say it would be a serious matter, and would, I am sure, cause much sorrow to the dear young mistress."

"You are right, Dawson," exclaimed John, in dire distress, "and yet I cannot bear the thought that Mistress Dorothy should be wed to so loose a man as Sir Falconer Bracebridge. Oh, if I could but see Dorothy once more, for I am sure she does not love him."

"I have heard old Madge say the same, sir. And, more, I have heard that Mistress Dorothy thinks you a most proper gentleman."

Carried away by his feelings, John Manners

seized the hand of Dawson and shook it, much to the man's amazement.

"Tell me, Dawson," he cried, "are there no means by which I can see Mistress Dorothy?"

Dawson ran his fingers through his tangled locks, and scratched his head in a puzzled way. But suddenly a broad smile beamed on his weather-beaten countenance, and he said:

"I have a plan, Master Manners, but first I must put it before old Madge, and to-morrow at this time I will meet you here and you shall know it."

"But why not now?"

Dawson explained that he did not like to take upon himself the responsibility of putting his plan into execution until he had discussed the subject with the old nurse, so there was nothing for Manners to do but possess his soul in patience until the morrow.

John Manners was far too straightforward and honest to play fast and loose with his good friend Aleyne, and so he told him all that Dawson had said. Needless to say, Aleyne gave utterance to his thoughts with a vigor of expression altogether unusual with him. This "wild, romantic infatuation," as he was pleased to term it, was unworthy of a man of mature years. The situation, as it seemed to him, was

an impossible one, for what hope was there, firstly, of disposing of Sir Falconer Bracebridge; secondly, of winning the favor of Sir George and Lady Vernon; and, thirdly, of gaining Dorothy's consent to be wooed by a gentleman who, although the son of an Earl, had little to look forward to?

William Aleyne was beyond all doubt a patient man, and as true and stanch a friend as ever breathed, but the limit of his patience was now reached.

"John," he said, sorrowfully, "up to this point I have clung to you, and my services, my sword, my life have been at your disposal. But now my dignity and pride are at stake, and, besides, we as gentlemen have no right to force ourselves into the affairs of a family in whom we have no concern, and who take no interest in us. Now, once more I ask, will you go with me?"

"No, Aleyne, I cannot go hence until I have once more seen Mistress Dorothy. It seems to me it is my fate."

"So be it. Farewell. I part from you not in anger, but in sorrow."

Half an hour later Aleyne and his servant were riding toward Derby, and no sooner was he out of sight than Manners felt that he had

acted foolishly, and he actually instructed his man to ride after Aleyne and ask him to return. But before the man could get into the saddle the order was countermanded, and Manners resolved to face alone the issue of the step he had taken.

The hours went by leaden-footed, and when night closed in a chilling sense of loneliness came upon him, so that he would have given much for the companionship of his true and trusted friend, Aleyne. Irritable even with himself, he wandered along the deserted road, until, weary and fagged, he returned to the inn, and entered the common room, where some of the villagers were assembled. He had been there for over an hour taking part in their merry-making, when the door opened and a stranger entered. He was a big, burly man of a somewhat ruffianly cast of countenance. Glancing round at the assembled company, he said :

“ Is Master Manners here? ”

“ I am he,” answered Manners.

“ Follow me, please; for I am the bearer of a message intended for your own ear alone.”

Manners' face flushed. “ A message from Madge or Will Dawson,” he thought, and, as the stranger led the way, he followed. They

passed out of the house into the roadway. The night was dark, though the stars were shining.

"What is your message?" Manners asked, burning with a desire to hear what the man had to say.

"Come a little farther from the house, for what I have to say is private."

Not suspecting treachery, Manners walked along the road, the man being in advance. Suddenly, as they reached the deep shadow of overhanging trees, the stranger whistled, and instantly Manners felt himself gripped as if in a vise. Before he could make the slightest resistance, his head was enveloped in a sack or cloak; then he was lifted by powerful hands and placed across a horse in front of a man already in the saddle, and the horse was at once urged into a gallop. The whole business had been so swiftly and suddenly carried out that the infamous plot had succeeded only too well.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

It is easy to imagine John Manners' feelings when he realized that he was being carried off as a captive. His arms were imprisoned by a sack or cloak, which had been hastily but securely fastened about his waist with a cord. It was, therefore, painfully evident that he was the victim of a well-matured and deep-laid scheme, which had been only too successful.

From the muffled sounds that came to him, he knew there were several horsemen, and, recognizing his utter helplessness, he resigned himself with such patience as he could command to the situation. Needless to say, his pulses were quickened by an all-pervading feeling of indignation at the outrage, for which he mentally vowed there should be a bitter reckoning.

For an hour the jolting and jarring never ceased, and he felt as if his back would break in two. At last the horses rattled over cobble

stones, and then halted. He felt himself lifted down, carried some distance, along a passage as it seemed, and finally he was dumped unceremoniously onto a bench. Next, the sack was removed, and the sense of suffocation yielded as he was able to breathe the air freely. He was bathed in perspiration, while every limb in his body ached.

He noticed with the quickness that a man in such a situation would be apt to note that he was in a low-ceilinged apartment, the floor of which was the natural earth, while there was one tiny window at one end. He had been placed on a stool, and a small table stood at one corner, while in another corner was a bundle of new straw. Two men stood over him. One held aloft a horn lantern; the other had the sack in his hand. This fellow was of gigantic build. He was like a bull, and must have had a bull's strength. His coarse features were deeply pitted with small-pox marks, and his great round head was thatched with a matted tangle of reddish hair. As Manners recovered himself he started up, exclaiming:

"Who is responsible for this outrage? Where am I?"

"That you will know by-and-by," answered the big man gruffly.

"I demand to know now." And instinctively Manners' right hand went to his sword hip; but he carried no sword, and had no weapon of any kind.

The big man grinned, displaying a set of uneven yellow teeth.

"A demand from a prisoner isn't of much worth," he said in deep, guttural tones.

"A prisoner?"

"Ay, a prisoner."

"What place is this?"

"I am forbidden to answer questions; therefore ask none. It will save trouble."

"By whose orders have I been made prisoner?"

"Again I tell you I cannot answer," snapped the man. "And, hark ye, sir, make yourself content. Yonder is a bundle of straw for your bed; many a fine gentleman has slept on worse, and, should you be civil, a jug of strong ale and a loaf shall be furnished for your supper."

Without another word the two men retired, the one who bore the lantern leaving it on the table. The sounds the door made in closing indicated that it was massive and heavy, and the grating of the key in the lock left the prisoner no room to doubt that he was very effi-

ciently secured. Somewhat dazed and exhausted, Manners sat with his chin resting on his hands. It was almost difficult for him to realize that he was not the victim of a bad dream. The whole affair had been so rapidly and skillfully carried out that he had scarcely had time for thought.

Presently he rose, took up the lantern, and made an examination of his prison. Its dimensions were about eighteen feet long by fourteen wide. The ceiling was rough, vaulted brickwork. The walls were damp. It was, therefore, probably a cellar. He went to the door and listened. Not a sound came to him. It might have been a tomb. He pressed his shoulders to the door, merely as a test. It was evidently set in a massive framework of wood, and was as solid as a wall. As regards the window, a medium-sized cat could hardly have crept through. Escape, therefore, was impossible.

Indignant as he was, John Manners had too much common sense to try to accomplish the impossible. He could not beat the massive door down; he could not pass through stone walls, therefore he accepted the inevitable. To fret and chafe and fume would not aid him

an atom. Enemies had encompassed him. Who were they?

For a moment he thought it possible that William Aleyne had had a hand in the business. But he put the thought from him, and was angry with himself for having entertained it even for a moment. William Aleyne was a man of noble mind, and would not lend himself to any act of treachery. Since it was evident, however, that there was a prime mover in the business, what more likely than that Will Dawson was at the bottom of it all? He had betrayed Manners to Sir Falconer, who had taken this dastardly course to free himself of a dangerous rival.

This view of the case made the prisoner furious for the moment, so that he sprang to his feet and paced up and down, stirred to his very depths by a passion of anger, which had only partially subsided when the door was opened, and the big man appeared, carrying a jug of ale, a loaf, and some cheese.

"Stay, fellow," cried the prisoner. "Tell me by whose orders this outrage has been committed upon me, and I will give you fifty crowns."

The big man did not deign to make a reply. He placed the things on the table, and moved

toward the door, where a second man stood on guard. Manners contemplated a dash for freedom, but the hopelessness of such an attempt was only too apparent, so he resigned himself, and, being once more alone, he very sensibly took a long drink of the beer, which he found grateful and cooling to his parched throat. Then, as hunger asserted itself, he discussed the cheese and loaf, and by the time he had finished his frugal repast he was in a calmer frame of mind.

It seemed pretty clear at that stage that it was not his life that was aimed at, otherwise it would not have been difficult to hire an assassin to make short work of the job. Such a mode of getting rid of an enemy was common enough at this period, and detection most difficult. But he had been deprived of liberty in an unceremonious and illegal way, which pointed to a secret enemy, and obviously one of power and influence. And there was no one the prisoner could think of in the least likely to resort to such desperate means, save Bracebridge. It was a very disturbing thought. To be outwitted and beaten is never conducive to calmness of spirit, so his situation taxed Manners to such a degree that it was long before he attempted to find temporary oblivion in sleep.

But at last he shook the bundle of straw out, and, lying down, slept soundly for many hours.

When he awoke a long slanting beam of light penetrated through a crack in the wooden shutter, and illuminated a narrow strip of the dripping wall opposite. Manners sat upright, rubbed his eyes, and stared at the glittering wet patch, and it at once recalled him to a sense of his surroundings.

He rose, moved the stool beneath the window, and standing on it opened the shutter. The small window was set in a deep recess in the wall, and the light being focused by the aperture, fell fan-like, illuminating the opposite space widely, but leaving the rest in semi-shadow. Nevertheless, there was light enough everywhere to bring into bold prominence the squalor of the apartment, with its moisture-laden walls, its earth floor, and its undulated brick roof, whitened here and there with a fungoid growth. Manners shuddered involuntarily as he noted the aspects of his prison house.

He was about to drag the table under the little window in order that he might mount and survey so much of the outer world as the aperture would enable him to do, when his attention was arrested by his morning meal, which had evidently been brought while he

slept. It was frugal enough—a mug of ale, a small coarse loaf, and a lump of the hard, red cheese peculiar to the district.

But there was something else on the table that, hungry as he was, had more attraction for him than the food. It was an oblong letter, bearing his name, and tied round with a strip of ribbon. With a thrill of nervous emotion he cut the ribbon, unfolded the paper, and read as follows:

“The liberty of which you have been deprived will be restored to you on one condition, and one condition only; it is that you give a solemn undertaking in writing on your oath as a gentleman that you will at once quit Derbyshire, and return not within a year at least. Your refusal to do this will be your death warrant. You are safely bestowed. Escape is impossible. Your place of imprisonment is known only to your captors, and they are pledged to secrecy. Therefore beware how you answer. A refusal to comply with this demand will be fatal to you; you will be left to rot, and an unknown grave will be your portion. Treat not this threat lightly, for it will be put into execution within a few hours of refusal to accept freedom on the terms offered. Your jailer will come for your reply at ten of

the clock. 'Agree to the terms, and your prison door will at once be open; refuse and you will never see another sun rise. Remember you have to choose between life and death, so ponder well.'

Manners burned with indignation as he perused this threatening and mysterious letter, but he had little doubt in his own mind that his enemy was Sir Falconer Bracebridge, who had found a ready tool in Will Dawson. Indignation gave place to a passionate outburst, but his helplessness made itself only too apparent. He recognized the futility of trying to burst his prison walls. From what he knew of Sir Falconer he felt perfectly sure he would not hesitate to carry out his dastardly threat.

Nevertheless the prisoner was too courageous, too proud, to accept his liberty and life from the hands of a man whom he so utterly despised. And since Bracebridge had resorted to cowardly and treacherous means to entrap him, Manners felt that he need not hesitate to free himself by the power of his purse if that were possible. Presently a key grated in the lock, the door opened, and the big jailer presented himself.

"Good-day, Master Manners," he said gruffly. "I await your answer to the letter."

"Who is your employer, fellow?" the prisoner demanded.

"I am not here to answer questions."

"Last night I offered you fifty crowns for the information; now I will give you a hundred if you will give me the name of your employer, and set me free."

"It is more than my life is worth. I await your answer to the letter."

"I will make it two hundred crowns. Will that not tempt you?"

"No. Your answer, quick."

The blood rushed into Manners' face. He looked hard at the bull-like man, but was forced to recognize the hopelessness of trying conclusions with him. The man was a Hercules.

"What is your name?" he asked haughtily.

"You can call me Hal."

"Then listen, Hal. Go to your master and tell him I scorn and defy him, and black-hearted fiend as he is, I will meet him when and where he pleases, and fight him to the death."

Hal laughed.

"You are a prisoner," he said. "But you can have liberty on one condition."

"And that condition I decline to accept."

III

“Then you’re doomed. Farewell.” Without another word the burly Hal turned on his heel and left the unhappy prisoner to his own reflections, which, needless to say, were of a most depressing nature.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PROSPECT DARKENS.

The day wore itself out somehow, but in the whole course of his varied and somewhat adventurous life, John Manners had never suffered such mental agony as he did during those leaden hours. The stillness of death reigned. The chirp of a bird or the squeak of a rat would have been a mighty relief in his awful solitude. He was not quite the man to abandon himself to despair, hopeless though his position seemed; but the hideous uncertainty, and his ignorance of what was going on in the living, breathing, palpitating world, which must have been so near, and yet he could not hear it, produced a sense of mental torture that was all but unbearable.

The sun swung to the west, and he watched the shadows creep along the glistening wall, as on a sun dial, and he gathered some vague idea of the time of day thereby. He had consumed the morning food that he had found

upon the table, and as the day faded a consciousness of an internal gnawing caused him occasionally to glance anxiously toward the door. But no grate of key or creak of hinge relieved the tension of his nerves. Then the words of the letter flashed through his mind.

“You will be left to rot, and an unknown grave will be your portion.”

“The wretches intend that I shall slowly starve to death, or, at any rate, they think to break my spirits with hunger,” he muttered. “Starve me they may, but they will find I can die like a man.” The horror of the prospect of slow starvation, shut off from all who knew and loved him, so weighed upon his mind that he flung himself upon his heap of straw, and ground his teeth in a sort of spasm of delirium. But the spasm passed, and there came to him a remembrance of Jedaan, the strange weird woman who had foretold his future. If there was the slightest reliance to be placed on what she had said, then he was not doomed to perish in that miserable dungeon, and he would triumph over his enemies in the end. But was she to be relied upon?”

On the answer to that question his fate seemed to hang. Between doubt and belief he fluctuated for some time; until he recalled, as

nearly as possible, all that she had said, and all that had happened; while from the happenings he drew consolation. And by contrast with the mental tumult, through which he had passed, a comforting calm ensued; hope rose high again.

Now it must be borne in mind that John Manners lived in an age when a belief in witchcraft, wise women, wizards, prophecy, and the like was universal, and it was, therefore, not a surprising thing that even he, with all his learning and knowledge of the world, should be superstitious enough to pin his faith to Jedaan's utterances. That faith insured him hours of sound sleep, despite his hunger, and when he awoke and beheld his prison illumined with the light of a new day, he felt relatively cheerful; and his spirits rose still more as he beheld a fresh supply of food.

The state of his appetite was such that he attacked the food, coarse as it was, with ravening haste, and never before had a draught of ale seemed so delicious. So intent had he been in satisfying nature's craving that it was not until he began to experience a delightful sense of repletion that he noticed another letter on the table. He tore it open, and read this:

“A last chance is given you, and you will be

allowed one more day to decide whether you will accept freedom on the conditions named, or die like a rat in a trap where you are? Your only hope in this world is to accept the conditions."

Again a sense of burning anger stirred his pulses, and he crushed the paper in his hands, but the anger passed quickly.

"My enemy will be foiled," he thought, "my rôle is not yet completed; my destiny not yet fulfilled."

He straightened the letter out again, and stowed it in the inner pocket of his doublet, and then in order to occupy his mind, and to pass the time, he commenced to carve rude characters on the table with the knife that had been brought with the bread. While he was thus occupied the door was suddenly opened, and the huge bulk of Hal appeared.

"How goes it with you, Master Manners?" asked the man.

"Well," answered the prisoner, "a book or an inkhorn and some paper would very much relieve the tedium of my enforced stay here. Surely these things I may purchase, though a hundred crowns will not purchase my freedom."

"The terms of freedom are easy," said Hal with a leer.

"What are they?"

"To do as you have been requested to do in the letters."

Manners ground his teeth with rage. Being unable as yet to fully realize how thoroughly he was in the power of his enemy, he was defiant and proud.

"Back to your dog of a master," he said, with a fiery vehemence, "and tell him that I scorn and spurn him, and absolutely refuse to accept my liberty on any such terms as those he proposes. And tell him further that though I am in his power now, it will be but for a short time, and then he shall learn that a Manners knows how to avenge a deadly insult."

Hal laughed unpleasantly as he answered:

"These are bold words, master, for one who is caged as securely as thou art."

"But your cowardly employer will never dare to carry out his threat."

Hal shrugged his shoulders.

"False hopes of thine, master," he said. "You are here, and here you will remain until you are dead, when your body will be thrust in a sack and buried in a hole where none can

discover it, unless you are willing to depart on the conditions named."

The prisoner had hard work to control himself in face of this menace; he looked angrily on the bulky form of Hal, and was once more almost tempted to hurl himself against him, and pit his own strength against his. Possibly he would have yielded to this tempting had he not realized by certain sounds on the other side of the door that Hal was not alone. And, after all, Hal must surely have his price. It was true he had refused two hundred crowns, a very large sum surely to one in his position, but an increase might be more effective.

It is easy to threaten a defenseless man," he answered, "and it is cowardly to insult a fallen foe, but no matter. Now listen, Hal. In your custody it appears I have been placed. Last night I offered you two hundred crowns for my liberty. Now you shall name your own price. Say, shall it be two hundred and fifty? Three hundred? Three hundred and fifty? Speak!"

"Spare thy breath, Master Manners," Hal replied. "You have not wealth enough to tempt me."

Manners was amazed, and said:

"Tell me, if for nothing else than the satis-

faction of my curiosity, how comes it that you are proof against such a sum as that I offer? Unless appearances deceive me, you are poor?"

"Ay," said Hal, "I am not weighted with worldly wealth."

"Why then refuse three hundred and fifty crowns?"

"Because I am stanch to him I serve."

"A noble virtue, truly. I wish I had a servitor so faithful. But surely there is more than an ordinary reason for such fidelity."

"That is so, master."

"Tell me what it is?"

"It is enough for you to know I am stanch. The reason is my own business," Hal replied saucily.

Manners recognized the uselessness of argument with the fellow; nor was he disposed to try the effect of a much larger sum than any he had yet named. At any rate, not at that stage.

"Truly," he answered loftily, "your business is your own, and since you are content to be a fawning creature in the service of a knave, so be it."

Hal's brow darkened, and he looked threateningly at his prisoner, as he said:

"Be careful, Master Manners, and speak with more civil tongue, for I'll trounce you if you speak ill of him I serve."

Manners' blood boiled. To be thus bearded and threatened by a hireling was almost more than his nature could stand. But, fortunately for himself, he recognized that violence would certainly fail where strategy might succeed.

"Go," he said, as calmly as he could. "To-day you can insult me with impunity. But to-morrow—— well, who knows what to-morrow will bring forth."

"You will have but few to-morrows, sir, unless you show more reasonableness."

"We shall see," said Manners between his teeth.

"We shall," answered the other derisively. "And if you are fool enough not to understand the position, so much the worse for you."

"Oh, I understand it well enough."

"And your answer is——"

"That I defy him, though he be the fiend himself."

"Then your doom is sealed. Farewell."

Manners heard the key turn in the lock. He was alone, and for a moment or two was he victim to a feeling of blank despair, nor was it

really to be wondered at, for his helplessness at that moment was so very apparent. His captors had evidently laid their plans so well that his friends would never know what had become of him. His feelings were still further harrowed by the reflection that Dorothy Vernon, who had seemed so well disposed toward him, would probably think he had departed out of Derbyshire of his own accord, and unable to avoid the force of circumstances, she might find herself linked in matrimony to the hateful Bracebridge.

The day waned with terrible slowness, and the want of some means of occupying himself made his position very hard to bear. But he summoned all his fortitude to his aid, and, as darkness closed in, he sought his bed of straw, and soon fell asleep.

His sleep was not altogether unbroken, and he had dreary periods of wakefulness, when thought with tumultuous confusion rushed through his brain. And then out of the kaleidoscopic muddle of thought a sweet vision was evolved, and beautiful Dorothy Vernon smiled upon him, and with a graceful wave of her hand lulled him to soothing slumber again, and whispered in his ear: "Hope,

Hope, Hope! 'Tis the dark hour before the dawn."

It was full day when he next became conscious of his surroundings. An inward sinking caused him to glance eagerly at the table; but this time it was bare. No food had been brought while he slept. By the way the rays of sunlight fell on the wall, he judged that the morning was well advanced. Rising, he went to the door, and applied his ear, trying to catch some sound. But there was a grim silence. It was like the silence of death. He kicked the door, and his cell gave back an echo. He paused and listened. The death-like silence was unbroken save by his own labored breathing.

Prompted by a sudden impulse, he seized the stool and used it as a battering ram; but it shivered to pieces in his hand, and the solid oak door, save for several dints, remained uninjured. He dragged the table beneath the little window and climbed up, though all he could discern was the topmost branches of a tree waving in the wind. Small as the window was, it was protected on the outside by two iron bars. The lonely prisoner descended; once again a sense of blank desolation came over him; he felt as if he would go raving

mad. The horrible suspense, the awful uncertainty, were torturing.

And now added to his mental distress was physical suffering caused by hunger and thirst. No man could have viewed the situation as it then presented itself to Manners' distracted gaze without a sickening sense of despair. And the unhappy prisoner was convinced that he had nothing to hope for from Bracebridge, who was not likely to scruple at committing any deed to save himself from exposure and defeat. That prophecy of Jedaan's, however, was the counteracting influence that enabled him to keep his mental balance despite the tremendous strain to which he was subjected.

How he got through that day and the night that succeeded he scarcely knew. He heard no sound; he saw no living thing. He passed the by turns from mental stress to a strange calm, the result of an iron will, and a belief, inclined to waver at times, but growing strong again, that his destiny was not to be fulfilled in that prison-house, and that Jedaan's forecast of his future would be literally realized.

The new day found him weak and ill, as a result of his enforced abstinence from food and drink. Strangely enough, thirst did not trouble him to any extent; but he was almost

maddened by an internal gnawing. As the day drew to its close he felt that unless something like a miracle happened soon his brain would either give way or he would expire from sheer exhaustion. But just as another fit of blank despair was creeping upon him the miracle did happen.

The sun had set, and he had thrown himself on his heap of straw in a state of semi-unconsciousness, when suddenly he was startled by a crash, and something falling on the floor of his cell.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MIRACLE.

The unexpected crash, occurring when Manners thought himself absolutely forgotten by everybody in the world, roused him, and he rose up and listened, but there was again unbroken silence. He sank back with a groan.

“My poor brain is giving way,” he muttered, and for a little while he lay perfectly still. Then the idea gradually took possession of him that he was not the sport of a delusion, but that there really had been a crash, and something had really fallen with a thud onto the ground. He got up with difficulty. He tottered a little from weakness. The light had nearly all gone, but he groped about on the floor, and at last his hand came in contact with a hard substance. He seized it. It was a stone, and he became conscious that something was attached to it. Instantly it dawned upon him that the stone had been hurled

through the window; that this was so he was sure, for the air of his prison was fresher. With difficulty he got the table under the window, and managed by an effort to climb up.

Yes; the glass of the window was smashed.

His heart beat against his ribs. His breath came in gasps.

He held the stone up to the fast fading light. Attached to it by a thong of leather was a small bone tablet such as was used for writing on. He strained his eyes. He saw there were some characters on the tablet. They were badly formed, but he managed with great difficulty to decipher them and make out that a message had been conveyed to him—a message of hope. This was the message:

“You will be set free to-night.—Jedaan.”

An involuntary cry of joy escaped from his lips. His strength seemed to come back to him as if by some act of magic. He found no difficulty in dismounting from the table. His faith in the witch woman was justified. Just as despair was overwhelming him and all seemed lost, she had sent him this message of comfort. But he knew that sudden joy was almost as dangerous as sudden sorrow, and so he tried to suppress himself, and, lying

down on his straw once more, he made a mighty effort to summon patience to his aid.

Sleep was out of the question, for, though he tried to be calm, he was excited. How long he remained there with every nerve on the rack, with wide open eyes staring into the darkness, and ears strained to a painful state of acuteness to catch the slightest sound, he knew not. His reward came. Somebody fumbled at the lock. The key was inserted. It grated; it turned; the door swung on its hinges; a gleam of light made a pathway through the darkness; a voice spoke. "John Manners, are you there?" it asked. In that moment it almost seemed like the voice of an angel. The prisoner muttered a reply. Then a curtain seemed to be dropped. A blank ensued.

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In the dreamy, out-of-the-world little village of Eyam, a few miles to the north of Bakewell, was a humble cottage, with heavy projecting eaves of thatch, and a patch of garden in front in which grew many sweet-scented flowers. In this cottage, a man, pallid and haggard, lay upon a low truckle bed, seemingly asleep, and beside him sat a strange, weird, wild-looking woman. At the door of the cottage, on a

three-legged stool, busy with a spinning wheel, was another woman, an ancient dame, with a kindly, gnarled face, framed in a mass of white hair.

Presently the sick man drew a deep breath. He moved his arms, he opened his eyes, and gazed around with a bewildered look. The weird woman stroked his head, and passed her hand soothingly over his face, saying at last :

“ You have slept well.”

“ Where am I? ” he asked, still bewildered.

“ With friends.”

“ And you, who are you? ”

“ Jedaan, the Arabian.”

“ Ah, now it is clear,” exclaimed John Manners. “ I was entrapped, I was carried away, I was imprisoned, I was released ! ”

“ True.”

“ Tell me the story.”

“ It is better you should rest now. Drink this cordial; it will give you strength.”

He drained the drink, and soon sleep stole upon him again. When he awoke the sun was declining, and throwing long, slanting shafts of golden fire athwart the village, while the flowers exhaling their choicest fragrance made the still air heavy. Refreshed and strengthened Manners sat upright, and as he did so a

man came from the outer doorway, and, seizing his hand, wrung it warmly. The newcomer was William Aleyne. His friend recognized him at once, and, returning the greeting with no less warmth, said:

"Surely I have been passing through some hideous nightmare dream, and have come out of the very shadow of death. Tell me the whole story, dear friend, for my brain is still confused. I can scarcely gather up the scattered threads of events."

"First you must have some food," said William heartily. "Oh, Dame, Dame Wortley," he called. In obedience to the summons the old woman whom we have seen spinning at the cottage door came in with a wooden bowl containing some hot soup, which she gave to Manners. When he had finished it another draught of cordial was handed to him, and, having drunk it, he felt perfectly restored. Thanking the old woman, who withdrew, he turned to his friend, saying: "I beg you now, keep me no longer in suspense. Tell me what there is to be told?"

"Your enemies' designs very nearly succeeded," began Aleyne; "but Fate decreed that you should be delivered out of their hands."

“And you have been Fate’s instrument?”

“One of them. You will remember how we parted. I rode away to Derby, but the following day I was seized with a feeling that it was my duty to return and strive once more to prevail upon you to abandon the hopeless chasing of shadows. On reaching Derby I heard to my consternation that you had disappeared. Your horse was still in its stall; your servant was distracted, and nobody could or would give any tidings of you. Suspecting mischief, I resolved to discover you if it were possible. I fear, however, that I should have failed had circumstances not aided me. The day succeeding my return Will Dawson came to the hostelry——”

“It was Will Dawson who betrayed me, eh?” exclaimed Manners, with warmth.

“No, Dawson is stanch as steel.”

“Then I have deeply wronged the man by thinking so.”

“If you have thought evil of him you have wronged him. He was the bearer of a message to you.”

“From Dorothy?” cried Manners, with newborn eagerness.

“I don’t know; but when he learned of your strange disappearance he hastened back to

Haddon to see what news he could gather there. But his inquiries were fruitless. Bracebridge had suddenly departed for London, whither he had been summoned by special messenger on urgent business of his own."

"But Bracebridge is surely at the bottom of this business?"

"Perhaps it is so, but we do not know. There is no proof."

"Failing to get tidings that would guide him at Haddon, Dawson returned to me," continued Aleyne, "and together we journeyed to Bakewell, where we fell in with that wonderful woman Jedaan, who by some magic, or other means, discovered in two days' time that you had been carried to an old mill in Miller's Dale, and was guarded by a huge beast known as Hal and a creature under his orders. Although I found it hard to restrain my impatience, I yielded to Jedaan's advice. She counseled strategy instead of war, and undertook to beguile your jailers. It was she who sent you a cheering message by means of a stone through your window, and that night she went to the mill, while I and Dawson, and my servant and your servant lay in wait. Into the men's supper broth she managed to pour some drug that sent them into

a heavy sleep, when she relieved them of the keys, and, hailing me, I carried you forth from out of what would have been your tomb, and by good Will Dawson's request we carried you here to the dwelling of his grandmother."

Manners was overwhelmed by a sense of his indebtedness to his friends who had rescued him from a hideous death, and he felt angry with himself for having for a moment suspected Dawson's fidelity.

For some little time he was speechless with emotion, but he tried to express his gratitude in the way he wrung Aleyne's hand.

At last he mastered his feelings to inquire about Dawson.

"He will be here to-morrow," was the answer.

"And Jedaan?"

"She has wandered away, impelled by the restlessness of her nature, but will return soon. Sleep and food will soon restore you to your wonted vigor, and to-morrow we will discuss our plans."

Manners recognized the soundness of this advice, and, the suspense being ended, he soon fell asleep.

CHAPTER XV.

A BOLD MOVE.

John Manners' state of mind—his suspense and anxiety—during the dark hours preceding the day which was to bring Will Dawson to his grandmother's house at Eynam may be more easily imagined than described. He had suspected Dawson, but he knew now he had been unfair to the humble man, and was anxious to make such amends for that unfairness as might lie in his power. There was another reason also which led him to anticipate the coming of Dawson with an eagerness that was like a fever in his veins. That reason was that he would get news of Dorothy Vernon. His friend Aleyne could give him none, and Jedaan, who possibly might have done so, had taken herself off before he had had time even to thank her for the great service she had rendered him.

The day had broken sullenly, and toward high noon rain commenced to fall. William

Aleyne had ridden into Bakewell in search of news, and, as Dame Wortley busied herself in such small household duties as claimed her attention and came within her strength, John was left to his own reflections, and now he was moody and now sanguine.

Noon passed, and two hours of the afternoon had slipped away. John now began to despair, but at length Dawson put in an appearance. He said that he had feared that he would not be able to come, for a hawking party was arranged at Haddon. The rain, however, had stopped it. Manners greeted Dawson with unrestrained expressions of warmth, and asked excitedly: "What news have you, Will?"

"I have no news, sir, or next to none, so to speak."

Manners' spirits fell again.

"But how is Mistress Dorothy?"

"Not very well, I understand from Madge. She has for some days kept her room on account of indisposition."

The heart of Manners seemed to rise up in his throat at this information.

"Why is she ill?" It was a foolish question, but the best that he could think of at the moment.

"Indeed, sir, I know not."

"But is she not happy?"

"Indeed, sir, I know nothing of Mistress Dorothy, except such scraps as I gather from Madge; but, if such a humble man as I am may venture on a remark, I would say she would be happier if the bond between her and Sir Falconer Bracebridge were snapped for ever."

John's brow darkened and his eyes flashed at this mention of his enemy; but, from the questions she had asked him on that memorable day when he had an interview with her at the woodman's hut, he knew perfectly well that she bore Sir Falconer no love, and could hardly regard him with respect.

"What of this Sir Falconer?" he exclaimed.
"I hear he is away."

"Ay, sir; he has gone to London."

"And was it he who caused me to be carried off and held prisoner?"

"I cannot tell you that, sir. It is a mystery that may be solved anon. But, now that we have found you again, I would like to speak of a plan that was in my mind when last I saw you."

"Yes, yes; I remember. You were to see me the next day after you had discussed your

plan with Madge. It has to do with Mistress Dorothy, eh?"

"'Tis this way, sir. Madge likes you, and hates Sir Falconer; and she is of opinion that Mistress Dorothy would like to see you again."

John's heart beat a quicker measure, and he almost held his breath with suppressed excitement.

"But there is the difficulty. Lady Vernon, it is said, has caused Mistress Dorothy to be watched, and the young lady can do little that is not known. And, perhaps, your own goings and comings may be noted."

"I see it," cried Manners; "a new light breaks upon me."

Dawson was a little alarmed, fearing that he had committed himself rashly, and he hastened to set matters right by saying:

"Remember, sir, that I have no grounds for saying this; and, should it come to my lady's ears that I had allowed my tongue to wag so freely it would go ill with me indeed."

"Do you suppose, Dawson, that I am capable of betraying your confidence? I will never do that."

Dawson breathed more freely.

"Coming to the point, sir, there seems to be but one way by which you can have oppor-

tunity of speech with Mistress Dorothy. And that is by donning the dress of a woodman and taking service under me."

"Dawson, you are a genius," cried Manners delightedly. "I know little of woodcraft, but I can rough it with the best. It may enable me to get the better of my enemies."

"I should be only too glad to see that," replied Dawson, "for I bear this Sir Falconer Bracebridge no good-will, and I would like to be even with him for the blow he once gave me."

"Perhaps your revenge will come," said John. "And now tell me, when shall this plan be put into operation?"

"Within the week. We are much about a build, and, if you will wear some clothes of mine, I will bring you all that is necessary."

"In view of the object to be gained," remarked John with enthusiasm, "I would wear rags and tatters, and live on beggar's fare for a year and a day. Delay not an hour longer than you can help, Dawson; and, should fortune favor me in this adventure, never fear but your future life shall be an easy one."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DARKENING OF THE SUN.

When Sir Falconer Bracebridge returned from Cheshire, having seen the body of his friend, Sir Ralph Bardsdale, deposited in the family vault, neither his temper nor his manners had undergone any improvement. The Bardsdale family were by no means disposed to regard him with favor when they heard how the representative of their house had fallen. So great had been the shock to the doting mother that her reason had left her; and when the poor boy's body had been laid in the family tomb the feelings of the relatives found vent in violent abuse of Bracebridge, who was accused of being morally responsible for the boy's death. Sir Falconer, therefore, left Cheshire in anything but a pleasant frame of mind, for he knew that this unhappy affair would almost certainly be productive of a bitter feud between the two families.

He was, however, a reckless, daring, and

ambitious man, and not the one to allow the death of an insignificant youth to interfere with his schemes of self-aggrandizement. His union with Dorothy Vernon would not only bring him great wealth, but power, and it was astonishing, therefore, that he did not endeavor to overcome his arrogance. But he had not been back at Haddon more than two or three days ere he allowed his weakness to display itself.

He heard that John Manners was still lingering in the neighborhood, and the Lady Vernon hinted that there was some reason to suspect that Dorothy had held communication with him; and that his presence in Derbyshire was a standing menace. Whereupon Bracebridge took the poor girl to task, not with the gentleness of the lover, but rather with the sternness of an offended master. Overcome with grief, she went to her father, and appealed to him to put an end to the engagement between herself and Sir Falconer, as she was sure she would never be happy with him.

Sir George Vernon could at times be iron-willed and stubborn enough, though in a general way he was an easy-going, good-tempered man, who loved ease and comfort, and was strongly opposed to contention in his family.

He showed no inclination to take a serious view of Dorothy's trouble. He pointed out that a man could hardly love a woman without being jealous of her, and if Bracebridge had cause to suspect that she was not loyal to him, what more natural than that he should be hurt? But Dorothy protested tearfully that if her lover domineered before marriage, he was likely to attempt to rule with a rod of iron after marriage, and she urged with the eloquence of despair that she should be released from her troth.

Sir George was moved. The happiness of his dear Doll was the study of his life, and he promised to discuss the matter with his wife. Lady Vernon listened impatiently to his arguments, and then rated him soundly for being so weak as to allow "an inexperienced and irresponsible girl to influence him."

"Surely," she exclaimed, "we are the best judges of what is good for the child's welfare, and this silly prejudice of hers must not be taken seriously. Until that luckless day when John Manners came to the house she was an obedient and tractable daughter. And ill becomes it, my Lord, that you should encourage her in her waywardness."

"I do not encourage her, dame."

"But she thinks you do. Think what the consequences would be if we were to give countenance to this nameless beggar, John Manners. The honor and pride of your house are at stake, and Dorothy must not be allowed to counteract the effect of our dutiful daughter Margaret's marriage. Doll is young, and does not know her mind, and I say, sir, it is your solemn duty to guide her."

"There is something in what you say," remarked her lord thoughtfully.

Encouraged by the advantage she had thus gained, she drove home the argument with greater force.

"Ay, in truth there is something in it," she exclaimed loftily. "The family honor is at stake. Is the whim and fancy of a child to be allowed to override the sound judgment of a father who has the child's welfare at heart? And, above all, sir, talk not of indulgence. 'Tis a fatal error parents make with their children."

Poor Sir George was completely subdued, and his lady's specious reasoning had its effect. The result was that he gently, yet firmly, led Dorothy to understand that no serious notice could be taken of her complaint, and

that her future interests and welfare were bound up in Sir Falconer Bracebridge.

The poor girl was disheartened, and sought consolation from her sister Margaret, but failed to obtain it. Margaret was engrossed and absorbed in her own affairs, and full of the preparations that were being pushed forward for her own wedding. She urged Dorothy to hasten to make up her difference with Bracebridge, and to win and woo him to her feet by those arts and wiles which were the legitimate weapons of every woman.

Dorothy knew now that she had little to hope for from her family, and she poured out her heart's distress into the willing ears of doting old Madge, who crooned over her darling, and bade her not take on so, and, betrayed at last into passionate invective when she found that she failed by fair argument to allay the distress, she exclaimed:

“ ’Tis shameful that your father and sister and my lady should treat you with so small concern for your happiness. It is selfish and unmannerly, and ill becomes them, for truly you are the bonniest bird in the nest. I care not if they hear me. I would tell them my thoughts, though they cast me out the next moment.”

"Never mind, dear nurse. I shall get over it. I must obey my father though I crush myself."

"If I were you," cried Madge with fiery vehemence, "I would defy even my father."

"Hush, Madge; that is treason."

"I care not, and they may hang me on the nearest tree if it pleases them. I have grown gray in their service, and nursed you through all these years, and it maddens me to see your distress. If I be allowed to judge, I say that the little finger of John Manners is worth all the body of Sir Falconer Bracebridge."

"But how do I know that Manners hath any regard for me?" queried Dorothy artfully, and not sorry to make him the theme of the argument.

"Well," replied the nurse sapiently, "if signs are read aright, you have pierced Manners' heart with your glances, else why lingers he here? And, then, what says Will Dawson? And, mark you, a man can read a man in such matters. He declares that Master Manners would carve his way through a multitude to gain your approving smile."

"Heigho!" sighed Dorothy.

"That sigh tells its own tale. Why not follow the promptings of your heart?"

"It cannot be, Madge; it cannot, cannot!" moaned Dorothy in an outbreak of distress.

"Fudge! I say that true love finds out a way, and not locks nor bars can keep true lovers apart."

Dorothy folded her arms around the faithful old nurse's neck, and laid her dear head on the withered old breast that rose and fell with the passion of indignation that stirred Madge as she had seldom been stirred before; and in muffled voice the girl said softly with a fret:

"Nurse, I would give much to see Master Manners once again, for I would put some further questions to him about Sir Falconer."

"And you shall see him, child, if I can bring him to you."

CHAPTER XVII.

A BARBED SHAFT AND ITS PRICKINGS.

Some days passed, then Madge was driven to give Dorothy some disquieting news. Master Manners had mysteriously disappeared. Rumors were many and varied. Some said he had had unholy dealings with a weird woman, and she had spirited him away. Others, that he had quarreled desperately with his friend, who had gone off in high dudgeon; while, in despair and chagrin, Manners had drowned himself.

But the story which found 'most credence with the rustics was that he had eloped. For, by a strange coincidence, and synchronizing with his own disappearance, the pretty and willful daughter—one Elfrida Wildgoose—of an honest farmer of Matlock had left her home and gone, none knew whither. There was nobody could say that John Manners and the fair Elfrida had been seen together. But, in the rustic logic, that counted for little; the

fact remained, they were both away, and that counted for much.

The news of his disappearance was like a thunderbolt to Dorothy. During the past two days she had been very bright and happy, because Sir Falconer Bracebridge had gone to London on "urgent business," as he declared. Doll was not interested in the urgency of his departure, but she was relieved by his absence, and the sun was bright again. Now came the sudden tidings that Manners had gone, too, and a dreadful thought tortured her—perhaps Sir Falconer had killed him. When she darkly and shudderingly hinted this to her nurse, Madge exclaimed hastily and with bitterness:

"I'll warrant you it is so. This same Sir Falconer has the fiend's nature, with the cunning of the serpent, and, having killed your true lover, he has gone a journey that suspicion may not fall upon him."

Doll's distress was so keen and agonizing that she said she would go to her father and tell him that Bracebridge had killed John Manners, but against this Madge resolutely set her face.

"Proof would be demanded, my child, and you have no proof," said Madge.

"But Sir Falconer and John Manners have already fought," urged Dorothy.

"Ay, ay, but it was a fair fight, as we are told, and arose from Master Manners having spoken ill of your wooer. But it would be a serious business to accuse your lover of murder. Have patience, sweet one, have patience, and the truth may come out, and you may have good grounds to get rid of Sir Falconer."

"I trust it may be so," sighed Dorothy, thinking only of the relief she would experience if she could send about his business the man to whom she was pledged, but who did not, and never would, possess her heart.

Not many hours passed before Madge came with a fresh version of Manners' disappearance. The gossip and the tattle had spread, and it ran from tongue to tongue in the servants' region at Haddon, that pretty Elfrida Wildgoose, who had a local reputation as "a fine, handsome wench, but flighty," had gone off with John Manners. To these gossips John Manners was of no interest, being only a passer-by. But Elfrida was known; stories of her coquetry were current. It was said she had trifled with this lad and flirted with that one; and many a village swain had broken his heart about her. And now she had run away,

and the stranger who had fought with Sir Falconer and been worsted, and was known to have been lingering in Darley, had gone as well. What could be more certain than that they had gone together? It was a fine piece of rustic logic, and to shallow minds it was proof "strong as Holy writ."

"He is an Earl's son, you see," remarked a kitchen Solomon, "and that is the glamour; but right sure she'll come to her senses and need somebody to console her—then she'll find none to do it in all Haddon, for who'd give countenance to a slut? It will be a doleful day for her when she comes to her senses, or I'm no true man."

Madge, of course, heard this bit of village scandal; and, being a fairly impartial chronicler, she carried it to her young mistress, but when she saw the effect it had on Dorothy, who turned pale, and seemed to be shocked, she quickly added:

"If John Manners has bemeaned himself, then I'll have no more faith in honest-looking eyes."

"But might not the story be true, nurse?" asked Doll under her breath.

"Why, yes, it might; but I don't believe it. These country folks are always ready with

venom on their tongues to besmirch a reputation. Now, since we are discussing 'might,' I say might it not be that Sir Falconer has ta'en the maid away?"

Here Madge showed her inconsistency by doing that which in the same breath she had condemned.

"Oh, Madge!" gasped Dorothy, the paleness of her face giving place to a sudden flush of excitement.

"Mark you, my treasure, I only say such a thing might be."

"But, Madge, if we could but prove it."

"Ah, if we could it would be a bitter draught for your lady mother to swallow. Eh?" and Madge chuckled at the very thought, for nothing would have delighted her more than to see her new mistress humiliated.

Dorothy remained silent; she sank into a state of absorbed pensiveness, and, as may be imagined, her thoughts were not conducive to tranquillity of mind. Nor was she comforted when later on her stepmother sent a message that she was to attend her in her private chamber.

She found my lady busy with embroidery work, and she said as an excuse for sending for Dorothy that she wished her stepdaughter's

advice in contrasting some colors. For a time the conversation was entirely about the work, until at last Lady Vernon gave it a more general turn, and finally with artistic artfulness remarked:

"There seems to be a fine bit of scandal going about affecting the reputation of that flighty girl, the daughter of old Wildgoose." She fixed her eyes on Dorothy's face to note the effect of her words, but learned nothing. "It appears," she continued, "the girl has gone off, and her father is broken-hearted. It was a sad thing her losing her mother. She has never been under proper control since then, and was always given to willfulness."

"Is there any word as to where she has gone to?" asked Dorothy, bending over the work, as if she was not in the least interested in Elfrida Wildgoose.

"Indeed, no. The hussy has left no trace, but it's very curious that that young gallant, John Manners, who for some reason has been loitering in Darley, has also disappeared."

"And what does that point to?" asked Dorothy in trepidation, and understanding her stepmother's drift only too well.

"It is not for me to speak with certainty when I have no warrant, but I do say the two

things raise a grave suspicion, and from my informations I believe Master Manners is loose enough for any wickedness."

Dorothy knew that this shaft was aimed at her, and she was no less pained than indignant, though she made desperate efforts to prevent any outward indication of what was passing through her mind. The opportunity, however, for a counter stroke was so good that she could not possibly resist it, and with a lowering of her eyes she remarked:

"Is it not curious, mother, that Sir Falconer's going hence should also be timed with Elfrida Wildgoose's disappearance?"

If Doll had slapped her stepmother's face the effect on that lady could hardly have been more startling than was that of the barbed question. Her work fell from her hand, she grew pale and red by turns, and her eyes, kindling with uncontrollable wrath, were bent on Dorothy, to the poor girl's terror, for she saw that a storm was about to burst upon her devoted head.

"Oh, but this must go to your father," shrieked the irate lady, "for, in truth, a more shameless charge never fell from the lips of a maid against her betrothed.

"But, mother, I did not make a charge,"

pleaded Doll with a whimper, for her feelings were overcoming her.

"What! No charge! What name do you give it, then?"

Dorothy fired up ever so little.

"Madam," she said, "you insinuated that John Manners had gone away with Elfrida Wildgoose, and I only retorted by remarking on the strangeness of Sir Falconer's going from hence almost at the same time as Elfrida disappeared from her home."

This did not mend matters; in fact, it only served to excite Lady Vernon still more, and she made that clear by saying:

"You add but fuel to the fire, and out of your own mouth you convict yourself of paltering with your lawful wooer, and letting your mind run upon a wastrel——"

"Mother!"

"'Mother' not me. I say you bring disgrace upon your womanhood, for it is wicked, and unworthy the daughter of my lord. Take a lesson from your sister Margaret, who has not so much as a pinhole in the armor of her virtue. Indeed, my lord will be distraught when he hears this. But I have no patience to discuss this matter further. Heavy is my heart to think that one so seeming fair should

trifle so lightly with the honor of her house."

This brought Dorothy to her feet with a jerk, so to speak, and for the first time she met angry glance with angry glance.

"Madam, I will stay no longer to listen to such harshness. I have done nothing to bring the honor of my house into jeopardy, and I swear I have done no wrong."

She could not trust herself to utter another word, but rushed from the room to Lady Vernon's astonishment, for the haughty dame was thunderstruck to find that she had raised the spirit of retort in the hitherto meek and mild Dorothy. Her pride and vanity were wounded, too, for she liked to rule with an iron hand. Then there was another reason why her feelings were more than ruffled. It was clear to her that Dorothy no longer had even respect for Sir Falconer Bracebridge, and that after all the match upon which she had set her heart might not come off. If this were so, she felt at that moment as if she would never get over the defeat, so great would be the blow to her pride. Of such vital importance was the whole business as it seemed to her that she lost not a moment in seeking her husband, and laying before him a full statement of what had passed between her and Dorothy; nor did

she fail to make much of Dorothy's remark regarding Sir Falconer.

Sir George listened with a gravity not altogether usual with him, and then provoked his lady into a further outpouring of her vials of wrath by saying that he thought she took too exaggerated a view of the matter, and was prejudiced against Dorothy.

"My lord," she said sternly, "do you call it exaggeration to say that a maid can have but small concern for her affianced lover when, unmoved, she hints that he has gone off with another?"

"Well, well, perhaps the lass spoke with but a light mind. You cannot have a head chokeful of windows on young shoulders."

"No, my lord, but one looks for common-sense even in the young," she answered ironically.

"Do you charge my Doll with lacking common sense, madam?" cried Sir George irritably, but his lady was not to be subdued by a show of irritation.

"Sir," she said, "you fail to see the point of my argument. It was only when I referred to John Manners' strange disappearance from Darley at the very time when Elfrida runs from her home that Dorothy hints that Sir Fal-

coner and the girl might have gone together."

Sir George broke into a laugh.

"Well, well, come, dame, don't be too harsh. After all, it was only a jest."

"A poor jest it seems to me. It was malignancy, my lord, because she was aggrieved at hearing aught said against this Manners. Don't be willfully blind, my lord, and you will see the matter in its true light."

Sir George became grave again, and stroked his beard after the manner of a man who was much troubled; and, being desirous of ending an interview which was hardly likely to be conducive to peace of mind, he said he would think over what had passed, and if it seemed to him necessary he would take Dorothy to task.

Thus he left his angry lady, and went out into the grounds, feeling more troubled than he had been for many a long day.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BETTER THAN THE PHYSICIAN.

Dorothy fled to her room when she left her mother's chamber, and so intensely strained were her feelings that she succumbed to a passionate outburst of weeping. She was a high-spirited girl, and to be snubbed and treated as if she were merely a capricious and irresponsible child was more than she could endure. Nor was it unreasonable for her at that stage to take a somewhat despairing view of the situation as she saw it.

In the early stages of her acquaintance with Sir Falconer Bracebridge she had felt some measure of admiration at least for him. He was a fine man, physically; a daring rider, a bold huntsman, an expert swordsman, and of dauntless courage. He was ambitious, too, and, according to his own showing, had powerful friends at Court.

As the acquaintance ripened the glamour dissolved away, and Dorothy began to think that

her lover was not without a strong element of the swashbuckler in his composition. He desecanted with glib tongue on his own exploits, and boasted roundly of his prowess both as a fighter and a debater. To Dorothy Vernon this weakness was something more than offensive, though she might have tolerated it had he been less masterful, less tyrannical, less violent-tempered. Whatever others thought of these faults of character, Doll regarded them with grave misgivings, and, finding that she could not hope for sympathy from her family, derived some measure of consolation by the discussion of her trouble with faithful old Madge, who was singularly shrewd and far-seeing, with a natural aptitude for judging men. And in this instance her faculties had been quickened by reason of her anxiety for the happiness of Dorothy, who was all the world to her.

Although Madge's opportunities of knowing Sir Falconer were relatively few, she had seen enough of him to be prejudiced against him; and what she learned from her "love bird" excited her to anger; but it was only when John Manners appeared upon the scene that she felt her opportunity had come. It must not be supposed that she would have inter-

ferred even then but for two reasons. She was much impressed with Manners. Figuratively, she placed him and Bracebridge side by side. She examined them carefully; she weighed them, measured them, probed them, contrasted them, the result being that John came off with flying colors, and his rival was entirely overshadowed. She also detected in Dorothy certain faint signs of admiration for Manners, and that justified her, as she honestly believed, in paying Manners off against Bracebridge.

It must not be supposed that she had any foreknowledge of the tremendous changes that would result from the forging of a link between the Vernons and the Manners. She only understood destiny as if affected to-day's happiness of the young girl upon whom she lavished all the affections of her kindly nature. She dreamed no dreams of the future. And if she intrigued it was that Dorothy might smile instead of weep.

It is safe to say that at this time Dorothy Vernon herself did not understand the issues at stake. What she did understand, and feel to the quick, was that her people wished her to marry a man for whom she instinctively felt she could entertain no wifely regard. That

was sore trouble enough, in all conscience, for a young girl. At the same time, John Manners was only a shadowy figure to her, in a sense. Love is insidious, and takes possession of us before we are aware of it, and the most that the girl would have confessed to at this stage was that she was interested in Manners. But when a young woman admits interest in a young man it is a sign that forces are at work which may speedily change interest to love.

Now, it chanced that while Dorothy Vernon was weeping her eyes out, after that fateful interview with her stepmother, Madge sought her in order that she might impart an item of momentous news. The missing John Manners had been found. She had set Will Dawson on to worm out some information, if possible; and he had allied himself with the weird woman Jedaan and Manners' great friend, William Aleyne. By the instrumentality of Jedaan, principally, the prison house of Manners had been discovered, and, by a fine bit of strategy that overcame the cunning of his captors, he had been rescued in the very nick of time.

Dawson hurried to Madge with the particulars, and she hobbled as fast as her aged limbs

would carry her to Doll, to find her bowed with a grief so violent that she was hysterical. Terrified by Dorothy's sufferings, the nurse forgot all about Manners, and fell to crooning over the distracted girl, using all her feminine craft to woo her back to calmness. Doll, however, had received such a shock that for once Madge's magnetic powers failed, and, alarmed by her dear one's burning face and bloodshot eyes, she went off to her master and reported matters. He, knowing of what had taken place between his lady and his daughter, was less alarmed than the nurse; counseled rest and a hot posset.

The morning dawned, however, and found poor Dorothy in a fever. Then the family physician was sent for. He was grave and solemn when he came forth from the sick chamber; spoke of a shock to the nerves, of overheated blood, of a tendency to a feverish condition of the brain, which might necessitate the clipping away of all the glorious hair. He left a volume of orders embracing what was to be done, and what not to be done, and a stringent injunction that the fair patient was to be kept perfectly quiet and free from all excitement.

Sir George Vernon was much distressed,

and his lady, on account of certain prickings of conscience, wept. But old Madge, she buckled to, and said "Fudge," and called the leech quack-salver. She vowed by all the saints in the calendar that no one should cut off the glory of gold from the head of her darling. So she set to work and bathed the head with damask water. She concocted a poultice of crushed mustard seeds and capsicums, and applied to the patient's feet, and gave her spiced rice water to drink. And she sat by the bedside, and crooned such a soothing, low lullaby that the sick girl fell into a deep sleep, and was so sleeping when the learned doctor returned.

Ah! How clever he was! He had been poring over dusty tomes which he had reached from his shelf to read up authorities on "A tendency to a feverish condition of the brain," and had come back armed with a dozen specifics, and a formidable pair of shears, for he expected, and possibly hoped, for could he not then display his wondrous skill, to find his patient raving; and he was further provided with scalpels for the blood-letting. But here she was sleeping calmly, with normal temperature and gentle pulse.

Madge, wiser in her ignorance than all the

rest, guessed that there was no disease working in that sweet body, but that the poor nerves had been played upon to their undoing by the sharp tongue of "My Lady," and that the blessed oblivion of sleep would bring the needed balm.

The disciple of Æsculapius went his way, swelled with a sense of his own importance, having left another sheaf of orders and the comforting assurance that he would return on the morrow.

Gloriously came in the new day. The birds sang blithely, the scent of flowers as they exhaled the morning dew saturated the air, and the sun's broad beams flung a wealth of gold over the land. Dorothy awoke refreshed, but pale; she said she had enjoyed a perfect night's rest. She bade Madge comb and brush the wondrous tresses, and this operation was being performed when the doctor sailed in; and, with a glance of the eye, gathered that there was no call for his operations. Nevertheless, he subjected Dorothy to much questioning, greatly to her surprise, and insisted that she was very ill, although she herself was conscious of no illness, and told him that when her hair was dressed she was going into the grounds with her spaniels.

But here the doctor rose to the occasion. It was not every day he had such a patient as the daughter of the King of the Peak, and he had no intention of letting her slip through his fingers like that. So he discoursed learnedly, used a wealth of jargon, and hinted at a thousand dangers she would run if she went forth yet. For a week at least she must keep her chamber, and drink various nostrums he would send her; and so importunate did he become that she yielded, particularly as she detected a merry twinkle in old Madge's eye. So the good man departed happy, and calculating the amount of the bill he would render for his invaluable services.

"My dearest," said Madge, chuckling, when the door had closed, and the sounds of the wise physician's retreating feet had died away, "we have won the game. For a week you shall keep your chamber; it will be a holiday from your lady mother's tongue. And dainty meats you shall have, and a stoup of good red wine each day, and venison steaks for thy dawn-meat, and possets sweetened with honey."

"Now, good Madge," cried Dorothy, laughing, "surely you don't want to fatten me for the market?"

“No, sweet one; but you must support your strength.”

“My hurt is here, Madge,” said Doll, touching her head; then seeing a look of concern sweep over the old nurse’s face, she added quickly: “I mean I am much concerned at my mother’s anger. She scolds me harshly, and would force me into Sir Falconer’s arms, whether I will or not.” Doll then detailed the previous day’s occurrences, to which Madge lent an impatient ear, and burst out at last with an angry:

“Pshaw! Your lady mother must be taught manners——”

“Don’t forget your respect, Madge,” checked Doll reprovingly.

“Forgive me; faith I lose temper to see you treated so unseemly.”

“Ah, Madge, how well I know your heart’s goodness. Come, let me kiss your dear old wizened face. I am my father’s daughter, and must, by duty’s law, do as my father bids me.”

“Though he bids thee wed with Sir Falconer?”

“Ay, though he bids me wed with Sir Falconer.”

“Alas, if it be so, sorrow, dear heart, will

be your portion," sighed Madge. "But surely you are a weather-cock; and one minute it is Sir Falconer and the next minute it is not Sir Falconer. Which would you have?"

"Ah, don't hurt me, Madge. I have thought upon it, and well I see that disobedience will be only a firebrand among us. Better that I should be sacrificed than be an instrument of discord. I must honor my father and my mother."

Seeing the humor of her young mistress, and understanding well that it sprang from heart sorrow, Madge deemed it wise to refrain from discussion until the fit of the blues had passed; nor was it an opportune moment to refer to Manners, as she intended, so she withheld the news she had been dying to impart, and busied herself.

She dressed her lady's hair, and soothed her. And, by tacit agreement, the subject that lay nearest their hearts was tabooed. Presently Sir George Vernon came to inquire after the welfare of his daughter, and he was followed by Margaret, and, later still, the Lady Vernon put in an appearance. Madge was prudent enough to withdraw. No love lay between her and the haughty mistress of Haddon Hall,

and harsh words to Dorothy might have set the old nurse's tongue a-wagging, and so have led to a rumpus.

For a whole week Mistress Dorothy kept her room. Not that there was any real need to do so, but as faithful old Madge said, it afforded her a holiday. That is to say, she was free for the time being from "punishment tasks" and nagging. She found much industry for her deft fingers in embroidery work, or the making of laces for Margaret. And, when tired of this, she amused herself with her lute, in the execution of which she was very skillful. Toward the end of the week an advance messenger reached the Hall to say that Sir Falconer Bracebridge would arrive on the morrow. This was far from cheering news to Doll. But when Madge allowed her feelings to betray her into an expression of irritation, the "love bird" checked her, and said she was resolved to receive her future lord with all gentleness and courtesy, for she was a "dutiful daughter." The nurse still kept the news of Manners' escape and discovery to herself.

CHAPTER XIX.

MOVE AND COUNTERMOVE.

Madge had kept the news of Manners' discovery and escape to herself, as she was anxious that during the week of holiday Dorothy should have no cause for mental distress; but she smiled as Doll made known her resolve to fall in with the wishes of her father and step-mother. With a sigh full of meaning, she said:

"Let it be so if you think it is right; but I could wish that your future husband were a better man. There, now, rate me if it please you; but I'll say my say though you thrust me out of the Hall as a vagrant woman."

Dorothy laughed, and fondled Madge.

"It will be long, dear nurse, before I thrust you out; but I am pledged to Sir Falconer, and must marry him. That is plain speaking, and bars argument."

"Ay," cried Madge; "but since we are speaking plainly, answer me this. Would you

rather wed sorrow in the person of Sir Falconer, who, though you tear out my tongue, I will say it, is a mealy-mouthed hypocrite, or yon gallant with the honest eyes, Master John Manners? ”

“ Hush, Madge! ” cried Doll half angrily, and growing very red in the face. “ You must not speak of Master Manners, for has he not gone away, and does not my mother hint that he may have gone with foolish Elfrida Wildgoose? ”

“ I will not put a lock upon my tongue any longer,” replied the nurse, brisking up with a strange energy that gave her dimmed eyes an unusual brightness, “ and, since your mother so hints, I give the lie to it.”

“ Madge! ”

“ Let me go on, for I can disprove her slander, since John Manners has been freed out of an old mill in Miller’s Dale, and was nearly dead when they rescued him.”

“ Madge, what is this you are saying? ” cried Dorothy in great agitation. “ What means this madness? ”

“ It is no madness, but truth, as God witnesseth. For days past the news hath burnt my tongue, but I feared to distress you. and so kept it back.”

Doll could scarcely speak, she was so agitated, but she managed to gasp out the question:

“How did you get this strange story?”

“From honest Will Dawson.”

“But——”

“I tell thee, sweetheart, there is no but; it is gospel truth. I set Will on to learn all he could; he consulted with Master Aleyne and the witch woman Jedaan; they found him a prisoner at the mill, and they say the death-rattles were already in his throat. But they saved him, and took him to Dawson’s granny at Eyham, where they cured him.”

Dorothy was breathless. Her hand was on her bosom. Her sweet face was very pale now, and in her beautiful eyes tear mist showed itself.

“Who put him in the mill?” she asked in a low tone, ending with something like a sob begotten of fear.

“Ah, therein lies the mystery of it,” replied Madge, shaking her wise, old head with some significance. “It is not known at present; but it will come out, or Heaven’s not just. It would appear he was enticed out of his inn at Darley, and, being suddenly smothered with a hood, was lifted to a horse’s back,

and borne helpless to Miller's Dale, where he was thrown into the cave beneath the mill. There he was shut up, and warded by two cunning knaves, one of whom was of mighty strength, and named himself Hal."

"But why did they imprison Master Manners?" asked Dorothy, still breathless and agitated, and looking at Madge with eager, searching eyes.

"You shall judge, my child. They took a letter to him, and he was warned to go out of Derbyshire, and vow on the honor of his name to return no more."

"Who writ the letter?"

"That is more mystery; but it was written by some scurvy knave, for he did not sign. And when the poor young gentleman would not give his promise they sought to terrify him by keeping meat and drink from him until he was like to die."

"Alas, poor Master Manners!" sighed Doll sympathetically.

"Ay, poor Master Manners!" echoed Madge, warming up to her subject. "It is a mercy they did not kill him. But it will be brought home to them."

"Who can have been guilty of this outrage?" sobbed Doll.

"Ah, who? Perhaps your lady mother, who is so good at hints, could give an answer."

"Madge! Madge!" screamed Dorothy. "It cannot be that——"

She hesitated to complete the sentence.

"That what?"

"That Lady Vernon has been guilty of this outrage?"

"No, I do not think so evil of her as that," answered Madge. "But I have a name on my tongue, though I would prefer you gave it utterance rather than me."

There was a dead silence between them for many moments. Dorothy was evidently sore distressed, and laboring under overmastering emotion. At last, in a tone that was only a note above a whisper, she spoke the name.

"Sir Falconer Bracebridge?"

With a display of caution that was altogether unusual with her old Madge responded:

"It may be he, and it may not be he. There are those who know the truth, and it may slip out when the time is ripe, but it would be better to call no man rogue lacking the proof."

"My father shall see to this," said Dorothy with growing indignation as she began to

realize the cowardly nature of the outrage. "I will go to him and lay bare the whole business, and Sir Falconer shall be tested, for should he have been guilty of this deed of wrong I would rather die than marry him."

Madge took her charge in her arms, and as she kissed the fair, white forehead and looked into the depths of the clear blue eyes, reading therein something of the thoughts that were passing beneath the wealth of red-gold hair, she said in the peculiar soothing tone she knew so well how to employ:

"My heart's joy, you must not go to your father. Put a seal upon your lips. Watch with eye of hawk, and wait with Job's patience."

"But, Madge, it is my duty."

"Ay, ay; you are keen on duty these few days past. But you have a duty to yourself first. If you should make this business known to your father, and Sir Falconer should clear himself, what then?"

"I see the point, nurse, but, alas! I am terribly distressed, for how can I think Sir Falconer guiltless, and if he be guiltless do I not wrong him in my thoughts?"

"Watch and wait," crooned Madge.

Dorothy nestled closer in the sheltering

arms, with a little nervous tremor thrilling her, and, dropping her long lashes over her bright eyes, she whispered as though she was afraid of even the walls hearing her:

“Madge, do you think that Dawson could arrange that I get speech with Master Manners, for I would like to hear the story from his own lips?”

The nurse smiled knowingly, and stroked the bonnie head.

“Ay, I think so. If you saw him he might give you items of which I know nothing, for in these matters there are always many small things that have a great bearing on the story, and can but be told by the hero. Ay, ay, you shall see Master Manners, for if he be going beyond the seas, as he told you he would, it is not unseemly that you should wish him God-speed.”

“But is he going beyond the seas?” asked Dorothy quickly, as she looked up into the time-grained face that bent over her so fondly.

“Indeed, I know not. Did he not tell you so?”

“Ay.”

“Then he no doubt spoke the thoughts that were in his mind.”

"But why should he exile himself?" asked Doll with a little whimper.

"That is his own business. But perhaps it might be to better his fortunes, perchance for blighted love."

"Blighted love!" echoed Doll in a far-away tone.

"Ay, for your love-sick swain is little better than a moonling, and often breaks his life because of a hopeless love. It is bad to be in love and get no response."

Dorothy remained silent; but a little sigh that escaped her lips indicated the line her thoughts were taking. Madge smiled, and seemed very pleased with herself and yet reflection would probably have convinced her that she was playing a dangerous game that had no possible chance of success as it seemed then, unless the good-will of Dorothy's parents could be secured. But Madge was not given much to reflection, and the sudden entry of Lady Vernon into the room put reflection at that moment out of the question.

"I am glad, Doll, to see that your health is sound again," said Lady Vernon in the haughty tone she knew so well how to adopt. "And the good news I have will, I am sure, give you unbounded joy. Sir Falconer will

arrive to-morrow, and he will urge my lord, your father, to consent to an early union. Indeed, I see no reason why your own wedding and Margaret's should not be celebrated together."

"But why such haste, mother?" asked Dorothy with a ring of distress in her tone.

"Well, that is a shameless remark," cried the lady angrily, and opening her eyes to their fullest extent. "Haste indeed! How do you make out, girl, that there is haste in the business? You have yet full three months for wooing, and for long your lover has waited your sweet pleasure. Now, there shall be no more delay, since it is for your welfare that Sir Falconer takes you under his care. A stronger hand than your father's is needed now to hold you in check."

An angry flush leaped into Dorothy's face as this thrust was made, and possibly she would have replied in a way that would have set her ladyship's pulses dancing had not a significant look from Madge warned her not to bandy words, so she meekly replied, though with intentional irony in her words:

"Your judgment cannot err, mother, and I, being a dutiful daughter, must follow as you direct."

Failing to note the irony of this, Lady Vernon fairly chuckled at what she considered her triumph, and, kissing Dorothy coldly on the forehead, she took herself off, much to Dorothy's and Madge's relief.

CHAPTER XX.

DIABOLO.

The morrow came, and with it Sir Falconer Bracebridge. Dorothy met him with such graciousness and welcome as she was capable of assuming, for it was assumption. Inwardly she shrank from him, and her heart was heavy, for, turn her eyes which way she would, it seemed to her then that there was no escape from this man unless she took her fate in her hands, revolted against the wishes and authority of her parents, and flatly refused to marry Bracebridge. That course presented itself to her as such a terrible alternative that in the frame of mind by which she was then influenced she dare not entertain it. Moreover, since the previous evening, she had reflected deeply, and asked herself over and over again whether she was not unduly prejudiced against this man. At any rate, she tried to believe she was, and though she was painfully conscious that she bore him no love she resigned herself

with a sigh, and resolved to try and respect him at least.

Bracebridge greeted her with an effusiveness that struck her as being forced, and she noticed that his face wore an unusual expression of anxiety. He also showed this anxiety in the way in which he asked her if she had no news to give him, and how she had passed her time during his absence. And while he questioned her he scanned her face with an eager glance, which led her to the conclusion that he was holding something from her. She therefore hastened to question. She begged to have particulars of his journey, to know whom he had met in London, and the business that had taken him there.

He answered her questions evasively, and this was too apparent to escape her observation, although she did not outwardly indicate that she disbelieved him. She felt perfectly convinced, however, that he was juggling with the truth, and in some way deceiving her. At last he turned the conversation into an entirely fresh channel by suddenly exclaiming:

“By the way, Doll, I have a surprise for you. I have brought you a present from London.”

“A present!”

“Ay; a live one.” So saying, he put a silver whistle that hung by a chain round his neck to his lips, and blew a shrill blast. Instantly the door was flung open, and there rolled into the room like a ball an extraordinary creature. The head was tucked between the legs, the feet were over the shoulders, the hands grasping the thighs, and thus doubled up it rolled over and over, until it gained the center of the room, where with marvelous agility it straightened itself out, assumed an erect posture, and Dorothy beheld a manikin so grotesque, so monkey-like, that a thrill of terror ran through her.

The dwarf was only a little over three feet in height, but he had ponderous shoulders, long, pendulous arms, with great flapper-like hands, short knotted legs, and splay feet. The top part of his skull was relatively enormous, and covered with a mass of matted, curly red hair. The eyes were small and deep, set under pent house brows. The ears were twice the size of ordinary ears, and curled over at the top. The nose was without any apparent bridge; the mouth cavernous, and filled with perfectly even and dazzling white teeth. The whole of this extraordinary being's face was covered with a short reddish sort of down. He

was fantastically dressed. His contorted lower limbs were clothed in yellow stockings, surmounted by trunks of crimson cloth slashed with green, while his doublet was maroon velvet, the sleeves being ribbed with white satin. Round his neck was riveted a narrow band of gold or silver gilt, this band being a badge of servitude.

He made such a profound bow to Dorothy that the top of his head almost touched the floor. Then, straightening himself, and striking a grotesque attitude, he said:

“Mademoiselle, your humble servant.”

Strangely enough, the voice of this malformed human being was soft and musical, but the small eyes that gleamed under the knitted, overhanging brows were like the eyes of some fierce animal. Altogether there was something so uncanny in the creature's appearance that Dorothy could not repress a feeling of fear, and drew a little nearer to Sir Falconer, who with a laugh exclaimed:

“Don't be afraid, sweet one; my manikin is as gentle as a dove, as harmless as a fawn.”

The contrast was so ludicrous that Dorothy broke into a laugh, whereupon the dwarf threw a double somersault, and then walked the whole length of the room on his hands.

"And, pray, sir," asked Dorothy, turning to Bracebridge, "where did you get that strange being from?"

"Come here," cried Bracebridge commandingly. With a hop and a skip the dwarf stood before Dorothy, and bowed. "Tell this lady who you are and how I became possessed of you."

"At your service, monsieur et mademoiselle." This with another profound bow. "I am from France, ze beautiful France. I was born at Corbigny, in the province of Nievre. My mozer and my fazer, zey did make burn ze charcoal, and vas ver poor, and drink mooch vine for comfort. Zey did sell me to one Monsieur Bianco, who travel with a troupe of jouteurs, mummers, and acrobats, and he did bring me to zis great nation, so that I make sport for ze English people. Zis grand lord he did see me in ze booth at London, and did buy me from my master. I am my lord's slave, and mademoiselle's dog." At this he imitated the barking and yelping of various dogs, spread out his hands, threw a somersault, sat down, tied his legs round his neck, and grinned like a gargoyle until at a sign from his master he assumed the upright position again.

"And what do they call you?" asked Doro-

thy timidly, as she looked furtively at the misshapen but agile elf.

"An it please you, lady fair, I am known as Diabolo the Dwarf, juggler, mummer, acrobat, and musician, a votre service. I can imitate all ze animals and ze birds. I sing, oh, divinely, and I dance like ze, like ze, what do you call zat—ah, ze sylphs. When I sing all ze people hold ze breath. It is grand, oh, so grand! Listen." He snatched up a lute that lay upon the table, and, striking a few preliminary chords, he trilled a little ballad with extraordinary grace and feeling, and in a voice that was bell-like and mellow. When he had finished he bowed low again, and, laying one of his ungainly hands over his heart, he said: "I am yours to command, mademoiselle. I make you mooch merriment, so zat you laugh until your ribs zey crack."

"But, in truth, Monsieur Diabolo," replied Doll, "it would be a calamity were my ribs to crack."

"No, no!" cried Diabolo, "when zey crack with laughter it is good, ver good."

"Indeed he is a merry manikin," added Bracebridge as he dismissed the dwarf with a wave of his hand. As Diabolo retired he executed a dance so irresistibly funny that Doro-

thy roared with laughter, and a strange expression of satisfaction spread itself over Bracebridge's face.

"And what think you of my purchase?" he asked.

"A most remarkable being, indeed, with a wonderful voice that is a strange contrast to his misshapen body. But oh, Sir Falconer, I do not like his eyes. They glitter with a cruel light, and I am sure he is capable——"

"Tut, tut," broke in Bracebridge with a peevish intonation. "He is absolutely without guile, and so sensitive that if you but chide him lightly he weeps as if his heart would break."

"Then his eyes belie him," persisted Dorothy.

"Truly am I unfortunate, sweet mistress," said Sir Falconer with a show of irritation, "since I fail to please you. I thought that this dwarf would afford you much amusement."

"Ah, forgive me," sighed Dorothy, seeing that Sir Falconer was vexed. "It is foolish of me to be prejudiced. I will try to like your dwarf, and perchance Monsieur Diabolo and I will become good friends."

"Well spoken, my lady," cried Bracebridge. "That is as it should be, and I am sure that

this misshapen sprite will be as faithful as a hound." He smiled; it was a smile full of meaning, and, bending down, he kissed her, though the touch of his lips rather caused her to shrink from him. He gave her no indication that he noticed this, and, handing her her lute, he begged her to sing to him, a request she complied with. Strangely enough, however, the ugly face of Diabolo haunted her, until she became so nervous that she pleaded a headache, and, begging to be excused, fled from the room.

For some minutes afterward Sir Falconer Bracebridge paced up and down in an agitated way, and his brow was darkened with a frown. At last, as he struck his right fist against the palm of his left hand as if to give emphasis to his words, he muttered:

"You are clever, Mistress Dorothy, but not clever enough to deceive me, and in the game we are playing I'll wager I'll come off the winner. You like not my dwarf, eh? Well, we'll see——"

His soliloquy was interrupted by the entrance of Lady Vernon, who seemed greatly surprised to find him alone. He said that Dorothy had been seized with a headache, and had retired. Lady Vernon frowned, and ex-

pressed an opinion that her stepdaughter found it convenient to have a headache at times.

"The fact is," pursued the lady, "the girl is willful, and likes too much of her own way. This failing must be checked. It can be done with firmness, and it is to her interest and the interest of us all that this should be done."

"Truly so," answered Bracebridge with thoughtful mien. "But much tact is required, lest the very willfulness you speak of should cause her to break away from all restraint."

"Surely she would hardly dare do that," cried Lady Vernon sharply.

"It is not safe to rely upon her not daring. She does not want for spirit, and might dare a good many things. Now, there is one question I should like to ask you, my Lady Vernon. Do you think that Doll's thoughts still run upon John Manners?"

"I really don't know what to say," answered the lady after a reflective pause. "Of course, you know that this Manners suddenly disappeared from Darley at the same time that Elfrida Wildgoose, the pretty daughter of Farmer Wildgoose, went off?"

A strange expression flitted across Bracebridge's face as he asked quickly:

"Is it believed, then, that the two have gone off together?"

"It seems so."

"And does Dorothy believe it?"

"I talked to her, and told her the rumors, and it seemed to me she was impressed."

"Perhaps," began Bracebridge with a certain hesitancy, and glancing furtively at the lady's face, "perhaps it might be of advantage to foster this belief in her mind, for nothing could tend to disillusionize her with regard to Manners so effectually as for her to think the fellow had gone off with a plebeian's daughter."

"True; but if we could get actual proof that that was so it would fill her with such a sense of disgust that you would, I am sure, have no further trouble."

"The proof must be sought for, my lady," said Falconer, looking much concerned.

"Get proof by all means if it can be got. But, after all, is it worth while concerning ourselves about this John Manners. He will come here no more, and what chance has Dorothy of communicating with him? But even if she could do so, I am fain to believe that she would not so far forget her dignity and the honor of her house as to practice deception. No, no,

with all her faults she is too high-minded for that."

Sir Falconer Bracebridge did not attempt to negative this assertion, but there was a peculiar shifty look in his eyes, a look that said as plainly as words that his thoughts were not the thoughts of Lady Vernon. He turned the drift of the conversation, however, by asking some questions bearing upon Margaret's approaching marriage, and having pretty well exhausted that subject he came back once more to his relations with Dorothy, and set forth his own view that it was desirable in more senses than one that there should be a formal betrothal between them, and that their union should not be delayed a day longer than necessary. On this point her ladyship quite agreed with him, and she promised to do everything in her power to bring about a consummation of his desires.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MEETING AT THE HAZEL COPSE.

The truly remarkable dwarf that Sir Falconer brought to the Hall proved to be a particularly amusing elf, being quick at repartee, full of quips and cranks, and exceedingly clever both as a juggler and an acrobat. As a musician, too, he could have held his own with a good many, while the sweetness of his voice astounded all who heard him sing. As might be supposed, he soon ingratiated himself with the household, though Dorothy herself, as well as old Madge, regarded him with unconquerable repugnance. Diabolo, of course, must have been aware of this; but did everything he could to make himself agreeable to both of them. He paid Doll the most flattering compliments. He composed ballads in favor of her hair, her eyes, and her beauty, and he was never tired of assuring her that he was her slave, her dog. But while his antics and his wit made her laugh, she could not get over the feeling of

dislike and mistrust with which he inspired her.

A fortnight passed, and there was scarcely a day that Sir Falconer did not plead to Dorothy to consent to a betrothal, and urge her father to allow the marriage to take place, either at the same time as Margaret's or very soon after. She, on her part, argued against hastiness. She reminded him that they were both young, and could afford to wait, and that she wished to preserve her freedom for some time longer. Needless to say, this did not please him; but he recognized that she had a will, and it would not be wise to too stoutly oppose it. But he was troubled. He seemed to have something on his mind, and at last suddenly announced that affairs of moment called him away; but, beyond saying that he was going into Lancashire, he volunteered no further information. A little while before his departure he summoned his dwarf Diabolo to him, and, in presence of Dorothy, told him that he should leave him behind, and he charged him to be as faithful as her shadow to the lady, to obey her lightest wish, and devote all his energies to amusing her.

Diabolo bowed to the ground, and, in his broken English, vowed that his faithfulness

should surpass anything that had ever been heard of, and that if "ze gracious Mademoiselle liked to command his life it was at her service."

The gracious mademoiselle told him that she did not desire his life; and, much as she appreciated his devotion, she thought his duty lay with his master, with whom he had better depart. To this Bracebridge said he had brought the dwarf to Haddon for no other purpose than to amuse her, and if he failed to do that he could go about his business; at any-rate, it was not convenient for him to take him with him into Lancashire. So Diabolo remained, and Sir Falconer set forth, accompanied by his squire and his body servant; and when Dorothy saw him disappear in the woods through which the approach to the residence ran she experienced a sense of relief as if a load had been lifted from her mind, and later in the day she joyfully joined her father, who rode out with his falconers to try some new hawks he had had sent to him from France.

It was late before the party returned; and, as it was close onto the hour of the evening meal, Dorothy flew to her room to change her dress. She was red in the face and excited.

"Madge, Madge!" she cried, "what do you

think? As we rode through the upper rookery we came upon Will Dawson and his men busy cutting up the huge fir that was laid low in the last gale, and among his men was one who bore a striking likeness to John Manners. Indeed, I could almost have sworn at first that it was none other than Manners himself; but I knew it could not be possible. And yet, Madge, the fellow stared at me with all his eyes until I was nearly tempted into chiding him."

"Ah," replied Madge, "you see that even a bumpkin of a woodcutter is fascinated with your beauty."

"Oh! cease this flattery," cried Doll, with something like real anger.

"No, I will not cease, and may Satan run away with me if I cease to speak the truth," answered Madge loftily. "Would you have me call you ugly? I say again that your beauty throws a spell even over a bumpkin. Now, then, my ladybird, rate your poor old nurse; she does not care. Perhaps it would please you to beat her. I will fetch a stick; but when you have cracked every bone in my body I will still cry if you do but leave breath enough, you are beautiful, beautiful, beautiful."

Dorothy was highly amused; and, throwing

her arms about the nurse's neck, she exclaimed:

"You dear, silly old tease. Why will you rave so about my beauty."

"I only repeat what your mirror tells you every time those blue eyes look into it."

Dorothy put her hand over the old woman's mouth.

"There, now, you are gagged," she said laughingly. "But, Madge, do be sensible. Now, is it not strange that Will Dawson should have a laborer so like Manners that if he were dressed better he would pass for him?"

"Ay, it is a marvel, but if you will promise not to rate me more for telling you that you are beautiful I'll give you a bit of news."

"There, I promise. Now, what's the news? Quick, quick, I say. I am all ears."

"Can you not guess?"

"No—yes." Dorothy caught her breath, and she fixed the old woman with her eyes. "The man I have seen to-day working as a laborer is John Manners."

"A good guess," smiled Madge.

"What does it mean?" asked Dorothy with breathless eagerness.

"I have held the news from you up to this moment, dear lamb," said Madge, "but it is

true that the man you have seen is Manners."

"What is he doing in such a position," gasped Dorothy.

"He labors like the rest of them."

"But why?"

"That he may see you and speak to you before he goes beyond the seas for ever."

"Oh, Madge, but this is folly indeed," cried the poor girl in real distress. "Think of the risk he runs. Think what would happen if Sir Falconer should discover him."

"Men have run greater risks for the love of women," Madge replied.

"But, Madge, how do you know that this John Manners loves me?"

"By many signs, dear one. Now, question not, but take it from me that Master Manners is breaking his heart about you."

Dorothy was so surprised, so overcome by the revelation, that she held her peace while Madge arranged her hair for her. But just before leaving the room to join the family at dinner Dorothy said:

"Poor Master Manners! It would be a pity if his heart should break."

"Send him a message, then."

"What would you have me say?"

“Tell him he shall have an opportunity of speaking to you.”

“Yes”—after a pause—“you may tell him that.”

Dorothy sat next to her father at the dinner table, and he talked much of the day's exploits, and of the merits of the new hawks, frequently turning to her for confirmation of something he had said, or for her opinion. But she was very absent-minded, and occasionally answered yes when she should have said no; and glad she was when the meal was ended and she was able to get to her room.

Two days of suspense passed, and on the third morning Madge whispered to her that at twelve of the clock John Manners would be found by the gate of the hazel copse. The hazel copse was a plantation of hazels grown for the sake of their nuts. It was about three miles from the house, in a lonely situation. For a little while Dorothy struggled with herself. She would go and she wouldn't. It was right and it was wrong. She owed it to Manners to see him once again, as she had promised, and she owed it to herself and her family to do nothing of which she might be ashamed.

The end of it all was that she decided to go, and, telling Madge to prepare herself, she spent

a little time with her father assisting him to check some accounts, and when her task was finished she slipped away. Her own horse and Madge's were already saddled and waiting outside of the big gate under the Eagle Tower. Dorothy tarried not a moment. She was afraid that if she paused to reflect her courage would fail her, and her purpose would not be carried out. So she and Madge rode away at once.

Dorothy felt that she was playing with Fate, and for the first time in her life was deceiving her father. She tried, however, to justify herself by mentally arguing that she was to keep her promise to see Manners once more; only once, for had she not promised, and was he not going beyond the seas, and had he not suffered on her account, and was it not perfectly right that she should tell him that she was sorry for him, and wouldn't even her father approve of her doing what she had pledged herself to do?

It was a pretty argument, a sophism of course; but it was as sound as such arguments are, generally speaking, and it served its purpose for the time being as a conscience salver.

The three miles to the hazel copse were soon covered, and by the gate a man in the garb of a woodman was standing talking to another

man similarly dressed. As Doll beheld them her heart failed her for a moment or two, and she whispered to Madge:

“Let us turn and ride home quickly.”

“Why?” asked the nurse in amazement.

“Because I—I cannot, I—I dare not speak to him.”

Before she could carry out her intention the two men separated. One disappeared in the wood—that one was William Aleyne; the other came forward—that one was John Manners. Doffing his cap, he said:

“This is indeed an honor you have done me. How can I express my appreciation of it?”

Dorothy was terribly agitated, and her beautiful face was unusually pale.

“Sir, who was your companion?” she asked in trembling accents, alluding to the man who had disappeared in the wood.

“My true, faithful, and loyal friend, William Aleyne. He, too, has become a woodman out of the regard he bears me.”

Dorothy’s mind was relieved to some extent. But still it was not without trepidation that she asked:

“Did—did your friend know that a meeting had been arranged?”

“ He did, and he will give us warning of the approach of anyone.”

“ If we are not in the wrong, why should we be ashamed of being seen? ” asked Dorothy.

For a moment Manners was somewhat disconcerted by the question, but at last he gave a fitting answer.

“ For myself it matters not, sweet lady, but no breath of scandal must tarnish your spotless fame. It is a wicked world, and there are tongues ever ready, with or without justification, to speak evil.”

Dorothy was pleased with the answer, but she still felt uneasy; and she noticed with alarm that old Madge was at least a hundred yards away. Her horse was feeding on the succulent young grass, while she herself, having dismounted, was making a posy of wild flowers.

“ I pray you, sir, summon my nurse,” said Dorothy anxiously.

“ And I pray you out of the depths of my soul to let her remain where she is that I may speak with you alone.”

“ This is boldness,” she remarked shyly as she let her eyes fall.

“ And who would not be bold for duty’s sake——”

“ Sir! ”

"Slay me with your anger if you will, but hear me first. Behold me in the garb of a laborer. Why have I donned it? Because I wished to look once again on your dear face, to hear your sweet voice for the last time."

"For the last time," she echoed in a whisper, her head bent low.

He was standing close to her horse, his hand resting on the front of the saddle.

"Ay, lady, for what care I for England now? I must seek excitement in some foreign land. I must find a Lethean stream; I want forgetfulness."

"And why forgetfulness, Master Manners?"

"I would forget you."

"But that is a pretty thing to say. Pray, sir, what shameless deed have I done that you are so eager to forget me?"

John sighed deeply.

"No shameless deed," he answered, with a wail in his tone; "but when a man has looked upon that for which his heart yearns, but yearns in vain, were it not well that he should try to forget it?"

"Perhaps you are right, perhaps you are right," she murmured with downcast head.

"Ay, my Lady Dorothy, it is indeed so. Oh,

why did Fate ever lead my steps to your father's house?"

"That seems to me to be a riddle, and I have no talent as a riddle-guesser."

Manners grew desperate.

"Mistress Dorothy, listen to me," he cried. Since that fateful night when I first set eyes on you, and the morning that followed, when you sent me from you in anger, my life has undergone a change. I have thought of you, dreamed of you, and, may I add, suffered for you."

The way that Dorothy's cheeks reddened showed that his words had struck home. She cast a furtive glance at his pale face, and noted his pleading, yearning eyes, and then with bashful hesitancy she asked in all but inaudible tones, but they did not escape his eager ears:

"What would you have me do? What would you have me say?"

"On what you say and do my happiness—nay, my life, depends."

She tried to look steadfastly at him, but could not, and averted her gaze again. She was evidently greatly agitated; her bosom heaved and fell rapidly.

"Surely, sir," she said, "you exaggerate the position, or seek to place an undue responsi-

bility on my shoulders. To say that I am the arbitrator of your life and happiness is——”

What she intended to say further was never uttered, for a shrill warning whistle rose with startling distinctness on the still air. It came from William Aleyne, who was keeping faithful watch in the copse. Manners started away from Dorothy's horse, and, glancing along the track, he fairly held his breath in wonderment, for an extraordinary, and he might have been pardoned for thinking, a supernatural being was approaching them.

It was Diabolo the Dwarf.

CHAPTER XXII.

ON THE BRINK.

“What have we here?” asked Manners as the dwarf approached.

“Hush!” whispered Dorothy. “It is Sir Falconer’s dwarf. I do not like him, so be cautious.”

This warning was not lost on John, but he had no time to question further, for the impish manikin approached rapidly, bowing and scraping. He was out of breath. There was a leer on his ugly face; he seemed excited, though he held himself in check. As he made obeisance to Dorothy he almost touched the ground with his forehead. Then he straightened his small figure out, and struck a comical attitude, while his wicked little eyes glanced furtively at Manners, and from Manners back to Dorothy again.

“My lord and master bade me guard you as if I were your shadow,” he said, “but you set off into the woods without me, and I have

sped after you, mademoiselle, with such haste that my bellows he have no more wind, and my heart he go pit-a-pat with mooch quickness."

"And, pray, sir," asked Dorothy loftily, "since you have been constituted my guard without my being consulted, I should like to know the nature of the danger against which you are to guard me?"

"Zey are many," answered Diabolo with a grin. "Zere are ze wood demons, and ze mischievous sprites zat bewitch maidens, and ze dragons——"

"Cease this silly chatter," cried Dorothy with such warmth that the dwarf seemed astonished; "and know this, Master Diabolo, I neither want your company nor your guardianship." Then with great presence of mind she turned to Manners, who stood apart, somewhat puzzled how to act, and, addressing him with assumed haughtiness, said: "Your petition, fellow, shall have consideration, but I can make no promise that my father will grant your request."

This was clever, and Manners immediately gathered the import of it, and as he made a low bow he said:

"I beseech you, lady, not to forget me." They exchanged glances, and he walked away.

"Yon woodman has fine hands," remarked Diabolo, "and has taken much care of his complexion."

Madge, who had come up leading her horse, and understood the situation, replied to the dwarf banteringly:

"You have a pretty wit, master dwarf, for so misshapen a body, and, though you are not handsome, your own complexion might be improved. Now, since you have come as a stranger to our Haddon, I should like to know what a woodman's complexion or his hands have got to do with you?"

"Nozing," replied the dwarf with a merry laugh; "but it is not a wicked zing to make a remark even in your Haddon, eh?"

"No; the wickedness is in yourself, my small image."

Diabolo laughed again. Then he turned a somersault, and danced a few steps, and was so irresistibly funny that Dorothy and Madge could not restrain their laughter. Finally he made a step of his hands by joining them together to enable Madge to mount her horse. She accepted his assistance, and when she was seated he caught hold of the horse's tail, and

vaulted with astounding agility behind her. She protested, called him a toad, and ordered him to dismount at once, but he only laughed and made jokes, said that his small body ached, and that her nag was powerful enough to carry his trifling additional weight. She was perforce compelled to ride with him behind her until the towers of Haddon Hall came in view, when he slipped off, and ran before to the great gateway.

Dorothy was exceedingly annoyed, and when she reached her room she complained bitterly to Madge of Bracebridge's dastardly conduct in placing a spy over her actions, for she could no longer doubt that Diabolo had been brought there as a spy, and in spite of his eccentric oddities, his humor and merriment, he was dangerous. Doll declared her intention of going at once to her father and making a strong complaint. But against this shrewd old Madge set her face. She pointed out that if she did that it might lead to Manners being discovered. For was it not evident from Diabolo's remark about the fine hands and complexion of the pseudo forester that he suspected him? So Doll perforce restrained her feelings, but her dislike of Bracebridge was increased, and she resolved that when he re-

turned she would insist on his sending the dwarf away.

Of course, she was greatly disappointed that her conversation with Manners had been interrupted, as she intended to have questioned him about his abduction and imprisonment, for naturally she was anxious to find out if it were possible if Bracebridge was responsible for the imprisonment. She had no doubt in her own mind that he was, but the thing was to get incontestable proof, though even if she succeeded in doing that, would he not endeavor to justify his action in every way?

And should it come out, as in all probability it would do, that Manners was lurking in the woods disguised as a forester, no end of trouble would arise, and Manners himself would be disgraced. It follows that had she not felt deeply interested in John Manners his discovery would have given her no concern. But she made no attempt now to disguise the fact from herself that he not only bulked very prominently in her thoughts, but she had so far fallen under his spell that she was possessed of a feverish anxiety to see him again. It is highly probable that at this stage she would hardly have confessed to being in love with

him, but she stood on the brink, as it were, and very little was needed to draw her forward.

The day following that memorable meeting at the hazel copse Lady Vernon took her to task for riding about in the woods with only Madge as an attendant, and from the tone and manner of her Ladyship it was pretty clear that she had received certain information from Diabolo. Now, there were times when Dorothy Vernon could express herself with great spirit, and on this occasion her indignation was so strong that she spake her mind somewhat freely. She could not understand, she said, what harm or danger was likely to arise because she rode with her faithful nurse over her father's private land.

"But you have never been in the habit of doing so until lately," urged the lady mother.

"But you forget, Madam, that I am no longer a child," answered Dorothy.

This provoked the lady to ironical laughter, and she said some harsh things, the tendency of which were that she considered it bad taste on Dorothy's part, as well as undutiful, to lay claim to womanhood yet awhile.

"And yet you consider me old enough to

marry Sir Falconer," retorted Dorothy. This did not advantage her much, however, as the Lady Matilda said that Sir Falconer would afford the very protection that was so much needed.

Dorothy after this held her peace. She felt that nothing was to be gained by prolonging the discussion. Lady Vernon was a woman of strong opinions, and was so fixed in her ideas that no amount of argument could move her. Had she been less puffed up with a sense of her own infallibility she would have gained an infinitely stronger hold on the regard of those around her, for she had many good qualities, but she liked to rule supreme, and could not brook contradiction.

As Dorothy Vernon sat in her chamber that evening, and pondered over the events of the day, her indignation knew no bounds as she thought of Diabolo having been brought into the household as a spy upon her movements, nor did the conduct of her stepmother tend to modify that indignation. And, needless to say, she felt very unhappy, for the prospect of her coming marriage with Bracebridge filled her with alarm. But one thing she resolved upon, and that was to see John Manners again, what-

ever the consequences might be, and, having made this known to Madge, the old woman descended to the servants' quarters in search of Will Dawson, so that she might intrust him with a message.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TRYST.

When William Aleyne heard that his friend Manners was going to disguise himself as a forester, he declared that he would do likewise. It was an adventure that appealed to him. There was romance in it, and when John pointed out the discomfort and inconvenience he would have to endure, he laughed, and said he did not desire that his life should be altogether a bed of roses, and as he had set out with his friend he intended now to see him through the affair whatever the end might be.

Both Manners and his friend adapted themselves admirably to their surroundings, and made a not altogether unsuccessful attempt to play their part to the life. After that meeting with Dorothy at the Hazel Copse, Manners could no longer doubt that he had produced a deep impression upon her, but he could not then bring himself to believe in the possibilities of his being able to woo and win her.

Moreover, the unexpected appearance of Diabolo, Dorothy's note of warning rendering it clear that there was danger, more than ordinary caution would be needed if he wished to avoid being unmasked.

In a subsequent conversation he had with Dawson, the worthy head forester told all he knew about Diabolo. It wasn't very much, and had principally been gathered from Madge. The dwarf was described as "a merry mummer," whom Sir Falconer Bracebridge had taken into his service for the sake of the amusement he was capable of affording, but Dawson was careful to make known that Miss Vernon and the nurse were suspicious of the manikin, and believed he had been introduced into the household as a spy. This information explained to John the reason of Dorothy's confusion, and her warning, when the ugly little monkey-like man so inopportunately interrupted their tête-à-tête.

The next few days following the meeting were dreary and sad ones to Manners; sad, because he was in such a state of uncertainty and doubt. But then the cheering intimation was conveyed to him by Dawson that Mistress Vernon wished to see him again to make some explanation, and he was to be at the end of the

upper terrace of the grounds at an hour when darkness would have set in. Needless to say that Manners repaired to the rendezvous with great eagerness, and waited in palpitating suspense until a light footstep told him that she, for whom he waited, was approaching.

It was a daring thing for Dorothy to do, but she had become desperate as she realized the difficulties that beset her in carrying out her desire to see Manners again. And at last she determined to make a bold plunge, and under the sheltering wing of the old nurse, met John in the grounds after nightfall, when there would be less risk of being observed. The upper terrace was lonely enough, particularly at night, and as it was bordered by the woods from which it was separated by a low wall only, the chances of a meeting being disturbed by unwelcome intruders were remote.

Dorothy was fully alive to the risks she ran, and she was not without certain qualms of conscience, for should by any chance it become known that she had secretly met John Manners disguised as a woodman, and at night, nothing she could say, or nothing she could do, would justify her act, and trouble of a very serious and grave nature would result. She and Madge had stolen from the house soon after

the evening meal, and she tried to persuade herself that, having promised Manners she would see him once more, she was bound to keep her promise, and by choosing night time for the meeting she was compelled thereto by the force of circumstances.

"You know, Madge," she said before they left the house, "this is the last time, I suppose, that I shall ever see Master Manners, for the poor young man is going to some foreign country, and I should not like him to depart bearing me ill-will."

The nurse winked an eye as she replied:

"Do not be afraid, my child, that this bold young man will think ill of you. And, of course, if it be true that he is going beyond the seas, it will comfort him, no doubt, to see you once again. But I would wager a groat that it will be long before he departs."

"But he told me he was going," cried Dorothy, with sweet naïveté.

"Ah, he is a wise young man," remarked Madge with another wink which plainly indicated what she herself thought. And in her case the wish was father to the thought. She desired to see her nursling happy, and she was convinced there would be no happiness if she married Bracebridge. And it seemed to the

old woman that there was no way of defeating Bracebridge except by Dorothy marrying somebody else. She did not pause to consider what this involved; hers was not a reflective nature, but, in a vague sort of way, she had a notion that the end justified the means.

As Doll reached the upper terrace, which was shaded by wondrous oaks and yews, and very ghostly and drear at nighttime, she clung to Madge. The night wind made an eerie melody in the branches of the trees, and, though the stars were shining, nothing could be discerned save the silhouetted trees, which looked like solid blocks of shadow thrown into relief by the starlit sky. Dorothy was nervous and agitated, for though she might not have been able to analyze her feelings at that stage and, notwithstanding, she had endeavored to make herself believe she was going to say farewell to John Manners, something told her, an instinct if you like, that love was asserting itself in her heart for the first time.

In the early stages of her acquaintance with Bracebridge she felt drawn toward him by some peculiar fascination, but very soon she realized that she did not love him. Manners, on the contrary, had awakened in her an entirely new sensation, and, try as she would,

she could not dismiss him from her thoughts. Strong, indeed, must have been the young man's influence over her, when on that moonless night she could summon up courage to steal forth to meet him in secret. Nevertheless, when she found herself on the ghostly terrace, and heard the dreary sighing of the wind in the trees, and the hoarse moan of the river, she was stirred with apprehension of some vague danger that prompted her to whisper to Madge.

"Let us go back, let us go back. I am doing wrong, and am afraid."

"Of what?" asked Madge. "There is nothing here can harm you, child, for you are clothed in the armor of your own goodness and virtue."

It was not often the aged servitor was capable of expressing such a sentiment as this, but the occasion, the hour, and the solemn surroundings drew it forth. She regarded her "love bird" with so strong a regard that she considered she was absolutely incapable of doing wrong, and that very regard drew from her the expression which might, with some truth, be said to have sealed Mistress Vernon's fate, for she faltered no more, but went on bravely to the extreme end of the terrace, and,

in a low, sweet tone, called out: "Master Manners, are you there?"

From behind the wall, where he had been crouching, up rose John Manners, and answered:

"Ay, lady, for though a thousand fiends had barred my way I would have kept the tryst."

This was a somewhat hyperbolical expression, no doubt, but had Manners sought for something more fitting to indicate the strength of the feeling he entertained for Mistress Vernon, he would have failed to find it. For great, indeed, must have been the danger that would have prevented him being there.

Dorothy had not let go of Madge's hand, and she still held it, and the little tremor of excitement that thrilled her made itself known to Madge, who said:

"Why does your heart flutter so, my bird? Master Manners will, I am sure, speak but fair words to you, and shield you from harm with his life."

"Ay, that would I!" cried John with eagerness.

"Peace, Madge," whispered Dorothy; "how foolish you are. But let us return, for should we be missed I dread to think what the consequences will be."

"Now it is you who are foolish," retorted the nurse. "You came to say farewell to this young gentleman, and, though you have not said it, you talk of returning."

Although none could see it, Dorothy's face was dyed scarlet, and so confused was she that she was either not conscious that Madge had brought her hand in contact with John's, or, being conscious, was powerless to resist it. But anyway Manners clasped her hand, not as a courtier, but with the warm, nervous grasp of one who was carried away by an excess of feeling she could not control.

"Mistress Vernon," he whispered, "if it is your purpose to say farewell, then is my life done."

"But you told me you were going beyond the seas."

"Ay, so I did when it seemed hopeless for me to think of ever winning you."

"Oh, you must not talk like that," she cried, catching her breath, and trying to disengage her hand, but he held it in both of his—held it gently but firmly.

"And why should I not tell you now that I love you?"

"Let me go," she murmured, struggling

again, but he kept her captive. "You must not love me; indeed, indeed, you must not."

"Don't be cruel to me," he pleaded. "No, cruel you are not, cruel you could not be. And the feeling that prompted you to come forth to-night and meet me here may surely lead me to the belief that you do not regard me with disfavor. Say but one little word to me that will give me hope; do not let me go from you to-night a lonely, broken-hearted man."

"I would not have you lonely, I would not have you broken-hearted," she murmured; "but what would you have me say?"

"Say that you do not hate me."

"No, I do not hate you. Why should I?"

"Ah, how sweet to hear you say that! Now, add sweets to the sweet by telling me I may hope that some day I shall not sigh in vain."

She struggled once more to free herself, and her agitation was very marked.

"It is unkind of you to keep me here," she said in a tone of distress; and it is not right for you to talk to me like that. Let me go."

"So be it," he said with a sob. "We shall meet no more. Farewell."

"No, no, Master Manners," she cried, "I—I did, did not quite mean that you should go from me like that." He flung out his hands

again, and caught hers. "But, oh," she continued, "I don't know what to do. I am sore distressed, and very, very unhappy."

Madge interposed here. She had only withdrawn to a short distance; not out of earshot, and, though the dialogue had been carried on in low tones, she had heard most of it. Now, she understood that the psychological moment had come when she might influence matters.

"Master Manners," she said, "have patience, have patience, good sir. My sweet child holds you in good esteem, else she had not given you this tryst to-night."

"Ah, thank you, thank you; a thousand thanks," cried Manners in a transport of delight; "but urge your dear young mistress to speak one word of comfort to me out of her own sweet lips."

Dorothy fluttered and struggled like a bird caught in a fowler's net; her heart beat audibly, and her temples throbbed, for she was laboring under intense, suppressed excitement. At last she inclined her head until her face was almost in contact with his, and there fell on his ears these words:

"John Manners, you must not go across the seas, but remain here for my sake."

She drew her hand away, and fled, and

Madge hobbled after as fast as ever her old limbs would allow her to go, and Manners, in a transport, an ecstasy, of joy, waited until there were no sounds to be heard save the song of the river and the sigh of the wind. Then he turned and walked through the night-en-shrouded woods, repeating to himself: "She loves me; she loves me."

CHAPTER XXIV.

STOLEN MEETINGS.

That night was marked with a red letter in the calendar of Dorothy Vernon's life. How she traversed the gloom-enshrouded terrace; how she gained the house and reached her chamber, to find old Madge panting and blowing beside her, she scarcely knew. It was a sort of waking dream in which everything was vague. But one thing she most certainly did know. Love had called to her; love had whispered in her ears; love had pierced her heart; love had entered into her blood like a fever. The dawn of love is to a woman a period of ecstatic bliss. From that moment her whole being undergoes a change, and Mistress Vernon was passing through that change. John Manners had called forth from the depths of her womanly nature a responsive chord, and she thrilled with a sensation such as Bracebridge had never been able to arouse. With an outburst of almost hysterical excitement she

suddenly flung her arms round Madge's neck and moaned, " Oh, Madge, what have I done, what have I done? What will be the end of this? How shall I look my father in the face again? "

Ignorant and inexperienced though she was, old Madge understood perfectly the girl's state of mind, and the conflicting emotion that was swaying her, as a leaf is swayed by the wind. She attempted no argument. She knew that argument would have been out of place. She directed all her energies to calming and soothing the agitated nerves, and when the " love-bird " exclaimed in a passion of distress, " I won't see him again; I won't, I won't; I dare not; it would be wicked," the old woman replied in the most matter-of-fact way, " I would not, dearie, if it is going to upset you like this."

But no one knew better than Madge that the paroxysm would be of short duration, and that a few hours' rest would work wonders. And it was so, for when on the morrow Dorothy rose she was blithe and merry, and not for a long time had the sweet face worn such a look of perfect joyousness. But, strangely enough, she did not refer to the incident of the previous evening, and Madge wisely held her peace.

Doll went off early with her father on a hawking expedition, and did not return until the day was well nigh spent, and as she submitted her beautiful tresses to Madge to be combed and braided for the evening she said with rapturous emphasis:

"I saw him again to-day, Madge, but not to speak to; and, oh, how he did devour me with his eyes. He is so handsome and manly, and has such a noble head."

"And he loves you, birdie," responded old Madge, very quietly.

Dorothy sighed deeply, but that sigh was infinitely more eloquent than words would have been, for it told too surely how deeply the dart of the god of love had pierced her. She was silent for some time, but her thoughts were running in one groove, for suddenly she said, as if to herself:

"Yes, I am sure John Manners loves me," but as if these very words had recalled her to a full sense of the dangerous situation thus created, she turned to Madge, saying: "I must not see him again, Madge. You shall send him word that he is to think no more of me, but must go away."

"If you will it so, so it shall be," the nurse replied dolefully, though a smile lurked in the

corners of her mouth, "but alas, poor young gentleman, how he will suffer, and when he passes beyond the seas his life will be a broken one. Indeed, I do not wonder if it ceases altogether."

This remark fell on fruitful soil. Doll sprang up, and paced the room in an agitated way, wringing her hands the while, her beautiful face filled with an expression of grave concern.

"Oh, what am I to do?" she cried.

"Be patient, and do as your heart prompts," murmured the nurse.

"'Tis all very well to counsel patience, but think what a tangled skein I am making of things. Were it not better that I went to my father and told him all?"

"If you wish me to answer that to the point, I say no."

"But give me your reasons."

"Sweet chick, we have discussed the reasons over and over again. Your father would take counsel with my lady, and my lady would be furious. John Manners would fare badly, and you would be taken to task severely, wedded to that most worthy gentleman, Sir Falconer Bracebridge, and soon after your poor dear heart would be broken. Alas, alas, it breaks

mine to think of it! But if you think it would ease your mind by all means go to your father and tell him everything."

This little speech did not tend to calm Dorothy's agitated nerves. She felt the force of all the nurse urged, and she was conscious of being on the horns of a dilemma, for John Manners had made too deep an impression for her to be indifferent to him, and so long as she could not feel indifference, she could not take a step that might, and, indeed, almost certainly would, lead to trouble.

By a slow and gradual process Mistress Vernon reconciled herself to what she was pleased to think was the inevitable. In other words, she made no attempt to juggle with her feelings and act as if she did not care for John Manners, when she knew well enough that she did.

Day succeeded day, and yet Bracebridge did not return. Dorothy was delighted, but she knew now that beyond a shadow of doubt Diabolo had been sent as a spy over her, and, though the ugly manikin was amusing enough, and paid her the most servile attention, she detested him, as did also Madge. To the rest of the household, however, he was a source of endless delight; his tricks, his mimicry, his wit,

his singing, his acrobatic feats, and his constant good humor made him very popular. But to Mistress Vernon he was a source of constant annoyance, for if she was going out, and thought that he was at a safe distance, he would suddenly bob up in her path, as though he had risen through the earth, dropped from the clouds, or come out of the trunk of a tree. He almost seemed ubiquitous, and, do what she could, she could not free herself from his unwelcome presence, except it was at night. She saw Manners frequently, but had little or no opportunity of speaking to him. He kept up the rôle he was playing with no little skill, and with exemplary patience, and apparently it was never suspected that this humbly garbed woodman was the son of an earl and the lover of the beautiful Dorothy Vernon. But lovers they had become, and, however great their patience, their powers of endurance were taxed almost beyond their extreme limit.

Three weeks had passed, and Bracebridge had not returned, nor had he sent any message. If Dorothy was delighted, and undoubtedly she was, her lady mother was just the reverse, and she questioned Diabolo very closely to try and discover if he knew anything of his master's movements or whereabouts. But

the dwarf declared ignorance with such an air of truth that she perforce believed him.

Sir George Vernon did not seem particularly concerned; at any rate he gave no outward sign that his mind was disturbed. As a matter of fact, it took a very great deal to upset his equanimity; he was an easy-going, genial-tempered man, upon whom the burden of life sat lightly. When his wife remarked upon Bracebridge's prolonged absence, and expressed surprise, he laughed, and said he saw nothing very strange in it; Bracebridge had much to attend to, and his estates required a good deal of personal attention. This did not satisfy the lady, though what could she say against it? But she asked him if he didn't think it peculiar that Dorothy should seem so contented and so unusually cheerful.

"Surely, dame, you would not have her moping and wailing, would you?" he asked.

"No, but methinks it would look more gracious if she showed that she sometimes thought of her absent lover."

"You cannot tell what the child thinks," he returned. "She knows how to conceal her thoughts."

"Wherein she takes after her father," the lady said with a sneer.

Sir George remained unruffled, for the shaft failed to pierce him, and his lady did not pursue the subject further, but her annoyance was by no means lessened nor her amiability toward Dorothy increased.

During all this time love had been growing and strengthening between the disguised earl's son and Haddon's fair daughter, and yet they could do little more than regard each other from a respectful distance. But at last an intimation was conveyed to Manners by the medium of the ever-ready Dawson that if he would repair to a certain spot beneath the lady's chamber when darkness had fallen, he would probably be able to have an interview with her, and so, while the faithful Aleyne kept watch and ward outside, and the no less faithful Madge rendered the same service in the house, the fair Dorothy leaned out of her window and conversed in low tones with the eager wooer below.

Dorothy felt that she had now taken the plunge, and, whatever the result, whatever the consequences, there could be no retreat. This clandestine wooing, however, was necessarily the cause of much uneasiness on Doll's part, for she went about in fear that at any moment the little conspiracy against Bracebridge and

the Lady Vernon might be discovered and lead to lifelong unhappiness. Often was she tempted to take her father into her confidence, but whenever she broached the subject to Madge—and there was little she would do without Madge's knowledge—the old woman argued against it, and no doubt she was right, for, apart from the fact that Sir George was much under the influence of his wife, he would hardly have been willing that his sweet Doll should mate with a man whose prospects were far from bright.

So Doll and her secret lover had to exchange their vows by stealth, and under the cover of the night, when, as they believed and hoped, no eyes would be able to see them. She had already given her pledge to John that she would be true and faithful to him, but she tried to shut her eyes to the consequences of that pledge. Sooner or later her father would have to know—and, what then? She dare not pause for a reply, and altogether the situation was too complex for her to reflect upon it calmly.

At length letters came from the long-absent Bracebridge. He accounted for his absence by unexpected demands that had been made upon his time and attention by a family dispute that

had arisen about the rightful ownership of a certain property; but he was delighted as he informed Doll, to be able to say that matters were being amicably settled, and he hoped to reach Haddon very soon after his letters. He declared that he was sighing his heart out for his "sweet love," and that every moment he was absent from her seemed like an age. The days were dreary and the nights long, he vowed, and he was yearning with irresistible desire to hear her silvery voice and look into the depths of her liquid eyes once more.

There was much more to that effect in Dorothy's letter, but it only served to produce in her a feeling of disgust and a sense of dread of his return. She did not withhold from her true lover, John Manners, what Bracebridge had written, and when she asked him how she should act, and what she should do, he had to confess that he could not advise her, but he did not fail to remind her again and again that she had solemnly vowed to be true to him, and he expressed his willingness, notwithstanding that he had been worsted in his encounter with his rival in Darley Dale, to challenge him to mortal combat and fight him to the death.

"And you may rely upon it," he added, "love of thee would so nerve my arm and

quicken my eye that I should be sure to win."

Dorothy, however, only shuddered, and said there would be no more fighting on her account; and yet she saw no way out of the dilemma. It was as clear as noonday to her that if Bracebridge came to know that Manners was secretly wooing her his fiery nature would be so aroused that nothing short of his rival's death would satisfy him.

CHAPTER XXV.

ANOTHER AFFAIR OF HONOR.

It may be supposed that John Manners himself was no less anxious about the future and the consequences of his actions than was Dorothy. He would have had to have been much less intelligent than he was if he had failed to fully understand the risks and danger he ran. It wasn't thought of danger to himself that concerned him, for his courage was dauntless, but he was troubled about his sweetheart, for she loved him, and if anything occurred to keep them apart she would probably not survive the blow. Many and long were the discussions he had with his devoted friend Aleyne, who for his sake endured all the hardships and discomfort inseparable from the position of a common woodman. Aleyne saw as a dispassionate outsider that his friend's position was one of extraordinary difficulty, and there were only two ways, as it seemed to him, out of that difficulty. The one was to

approach Sir George and Lady Vernon, and make full and frank avowal of his passion for their daughter, and plead to them for their consent that he might woo her. The other was to furnish such proof that Bracebridge was little better than an adventurer, that they would at once shut their doors against him.

The first way had already been examined and talked over. Madge had resolutely set her face against it, Dorothy was afraid, and Manners had a strong feeling that his suit would never be regarded favorably, and, after all, it was very human for him to shrink from taking a course that might probably separate him for ever from the woman who had now become dearer to him than life. The second was more feasible.

The tongue of scandal, or mayhap spite, had occasionally been busy with Bracebridge's name. At any rate, Manners had felt justified on that memorable occasion when he had met Dorothy at the woodman's hut in Haddon Chase in hinting at disreputable conduct on the part of Sir Falconer. Now it was but fair that he should take steps to prove his statement, right or wrong. If Bracebridge could be shown to be disreputable and unworthy, there could be no doubt that Sir George Ver-

non would never consent to his being mated with Dorothy.

Yes, Manners would and must justify himself, and so he announced his intention of going forth to seek for the proof that was required. But his good friend laid a restraining hand on his arm, and said :

“ Let the task be mine. Remain you here to comfort your ladylove, while I, who have no such cause for staying, will set forth and endeavor to trace Sir Falconer Bracebridge to his lair. Possibly there is much to be learned that is worth learning ; at any rate, on me shall fall the duty, and as I value honor so you may depend upon my bringing a true and faithful report.”

So it came to pass that John Manners yielded to his friend, and they parted with many adieus, and Aleyne promised to return with all convenient speed. Still wearing his forester’s disguise, he set off in the afternoon, intending to journey to the place in Lancashire from whence Bracebridge had addressed his letters.

The next day Diabolo had disappeared from Haddon, and all inquiries failed to elicit when he went and where he had gone to.

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In the interest of the reader who so far has followed the fortunes of the characters who play their part in this very human drama of real life it is necessary to turn once more to Sir Falconer Bracebridge. It has already been demonstrated that this gentleman was not only very worldly, but very unprincipled. His ambition was boundless, and in order to gratify it he was prepared to go to almost any extreme. Added to this was an over-weening vanity which made him intolerant of everyone else's opinions and feelings. It was due entirely to this vanity that he took young Ralph Bardsdale with him to Haddon Hall.

The Bardsdales were a somewhat homely family, with no very lofty aspirations, and it pleased Bracebridge to pose before them as a man of tremendous influence and great importance. The fame of the Vernons, and particularly of Dorothy Vernon, King of the Peak, had reached them, and they had also heard much of the matchless beauty of Dorothy Vernon, and when Bracebridge boasted of his power and influence over the Vernons, and that he was the bridegroom-elect of Dorothy, they probably indicated by their manner some incredulity, which piqued the man's consummate vanity. Hence it came about that he

resolved to take the stripling, Ralph, with him to Haddon, so that when the youth returned he would tattle freely, and that would gratify Bracebridge immensely.

But when he started off from Cheshire with this raw youth he little dreamed of what the results of his act would be. He was not the man to be greatly moved or deeply touched by the lad's untimely death, for, like the great monarch, Henry VIII., whom he resembled so much in appearance, he did not indulge in sentiment, and his conscience was so hide-bound that nothing disturbed it. At the same time he was not free from concern as to what extent the boy's death might involve him in trouble with the Bardsdales. When they learned of Ralph's death, and the circumstances which led up to the fatal encounter, they were stunned by the shock, and before they had recovered to any extent Bracebridge had taken his departure, and on returning to Haddon he found that a new danger and difficulty confronted him.

His rival and antagonist had not succumbed, as he had hoped he would; and from what he gathered from Lady Vernon he had reason to fear that he might after all lose Dorothy. No evidence was forthcoming that Dorothy and

John Manners were in communication; old Madge and Will Dawson had managed the business so cleverly that they had given their opponents no clue to go upon. But the fact that Manners was still lingering in Darley, where he had made himself a *persona grata*, was in itself a fact sufficiently suspicious to Bracebridge's mind to render it desirable that he should be got out of the way.

But then came the question, how was that to be effected? He could not have found a shadow of excuse for again challenging him to combat, and even if this could have been done Manners had proved himself far too clever a swordsman to be challenged lightly. Bracebridge knew only too well that it was only by a lucky chance alone he had been enabled to come out of the encounter successfully. He might not be so fortunate on another occasion. No, to fight his rival a second time would be too risky. He must find some other way of removing him.

Near Chorley, in Lancashire, Sir Falconer Bracebridge owned a small manor, which had been bequeathed to him by a relative. It was a profitless property, but there was an old house dating back nearly two hundred years. It had from time to time been restored and

partly rebuilt, and the preceding owner had converted it into something like a stronghold. For that reason Bracebridge retained it, for as a soldier of fortune he thought the time might possibly come when it would be useful to him, so he placed it in charge of a creature of his, one Henry Sparbolt, who was conspicuous by his enormous physical proportions and great muscular strength.

This man had been in the service of Bracebridge's father, but on the death of that gentleman had abandoned himself to evil ways, and after a vicious course of some years he killed a man in a brawl, and to escape the penalty of his deed fled to France. Being unable, however, to speak French, and having no means, he was glad enough to return, and, going to Sir Falconer, he offered to be his slave if he would protect him. Bracebridge saw at once that this strong knave, who was not lacking in shrewdness or intelligence, might be useful, and so he placed him in charge of the small manor in Chorley. When the difficulty about Manners arose Bracebridge sent for his factotum, who brought with him a brother rascal, known as Peter Crabshaw, who was also dependent upon Bracebridge's bounty, and among them they concocted the

dastardly plot of carrying Manners off to the old mill in Miller's Dale, which had been secured for the purpose.

It was hoped that by immuring John in this place he could be coerced into pledging his word of honor he would go out of Derbyshire. But, failing that, the ruffian Hal, otherwise Henry Sparbolt, received a hint that his prisoner might remain in Derbyshire, but not as a living man. Just before the dastardly plot was put into execution the cautious Bracebridge deemed it advisable that he should journey toward London, for naturally he was very anxious that it should not be known he was responsible for Manners' abduction.

It was near London that he fell in with Diabolo, who was one of a troupe of mountebanks performing at a fair. Bracebridge took a fancy to the manikin, and it suddenly occurred to him that the fellow, apart from his ability to amuse, and his oddities generally, might be turned into a faithful spy. So he practically purchased him under an indenture which gave him absolute control of his services for a number of years.

Diabolo himself, being, of course, a contracting party, Bracebridge soon found that in this dwarf he had got a very pliable tool, who for

the sake of gain would lend himself to anything, and on the way back to Haddon he was posted up in duties he would have to undertake. In short, he was to be his master's watchdog.

On arriving at Haddon, Bracebridge learned to his alarm that John Manners had escaped out of the net that had been so cunningly spread for him, and it was not known where he had flown to. On the top of this trouble came another one. An uncle of young Ralph Bardsdale, who had been greatly attached to the youth, and who strongly disliked Bracebridge, wrote to the latter saying that he should hold him responsible for the lad's death. He used some very abusive terms to Bracebridge, and wound up by saying he would proceed at once to Haddon, and have a full inquiry made into all the circumstances attending the death of Ralph.

As it would never have done for Bracebridge to allow this peppery person to come to Haddon, he dispatched an express messenger to him to say that he was then on his way to his property in Chorley, and there he would be glad to meet him. The messenger was just in time to stay the uncle, whose name, by the way, was Featherstone, from starting for Had-

don, and, full of fire and fury, he set out for Chorley instead, accompanied by two servants. Featherstone was the youngest brother of Lady Bardsdale. He was a sturdy, lusty fellow, and quite as much of a fire-eater as was Bracebridge himself.

At that period it did not take much to stir up the blood of young gentlemen who wore swords, for the wearers were as a rule only too anxious to test the quality and temper of their steel, while a desire to "show off" was often responsible for a good deal of bloodshed and much bitterness. But Featherstone felt that he had a genuine cause of grievance. Apart from the terrible distress of his sister at the loss of her son, he held Bracebridge in no esteem, and blamed him for having allowed the young man to fight. Indeed, Featherstone had got a notion that Bracebridge had set him on to fight.

When Featherstone reached Chorley he found Bracebridge in a conciliatory mood, and he was received with a certain amount of respectful deference. Bracebridge knew that he had everything to lose and nothing to gain by quarreling with this gentleman, and he was, therefore, anxious to avoid a conflict, if possible. But though Featherstone listened patient-

ly to the explanations that were offered he was neither satisfied nor appeased. He bluntly told Bracebridge that he had no business to have taken Bardsdale with him, knowing as he did he was going deliberately to force Manners to fight, and that morally he was responsible for the boy's death.

An argument of this kind between two men who did not love each other, and who were privileged to wear deadly weapons, in the use of which they were both skilled, was hardly likely to be confined to words and mutual re-crimination. Bracebridge's vanity was very easily pricked. He always believed himself the better man, and was quick to resent any charge brought against him, however well founded it might be. The result of the words of warfare was therefore that Sir Falconer's limited stock of patience became exhausted; and, tapping the hilt of his sword significantly, he said:

"Look here, sir, I've given you my explanation, and you refuse to accept it, and as it seems to me you have come here with the deliberate intention to insult me, I beg to say I am at your service, and with my sword I know how to defend my honor."

"It seems to me," answered the other,

“that your honor is as easily put on and off to suit your convenience as your cloak, but, nevertheless, if you think such a flimsy thing as your honor is worth defending I am ready to give you the opportunity.”

Needless to say this taunt aroused the demon in Bracebridge, as no doubt it was intended to do. He said it was an insult no gentleman would tolerate, and he bade his visitor name a time and place when the final appeal should be made.

Featherstone replied that there was no time like the present; that that place was good enough for him; that he had two trusty attendants with him who would see fair play; and he wound up by accusing his opponent of being an adventurer and a dastard, and he hurled his glove in his face.

That was the final straw. Much as Bracebridge desired to avoid an encounter, he could not pocket such an affront as that; and so the disputants descended to the courtyard, which soon resounded with the clash of steel, while each of the fighters strained every nerve and sinew for mastery.

Bracebridge, whatever his moral character was, could not be depised as a swordsman, but

in this instance, notwithstanding his weight and power of thrust, he had met more than his match.

Featherstone was a perfect master of fence. He played with his antagonist for a while as a salmon fisher might play with a hooked salmon until he was exhausted, then he gaffed him, or, in other words, he ran him through the body, and Bracebridge went to the ground like a felled ox. The fight had been conducted in a perfectly fair manner, and according to the rules which were usually observed in such cases. Therefore Mr. Featherstone, having wiped his weapon, and the business which had brought him being finished, went forth with his attendants, unmolested, and returned to his home very well pleased with his day's work.

In the meantime the wounded man was borne with all speed to his chamber, a trail of blood marking the way, and a surgeon was procured without a moment's loss of time. Bracebridge had been pierced below the ribs on the left side, and when the learned leech had made an examination of his patient he looked grave, and let it be known that he considered the wound a very dangerous one.

It would not be easy to describe Brace-

bridge's thoughts and feelings when he realized that his life was in jeopardy, and that death was likely to put a stop to his ambitious schemes and dreams.

For several days his existence hung by a thread. But he had youth and a strong will in his favor, and these, combined with undoubted skill on the part of the surgeon, pulled him from the brink of the grave, and having passed the crisis he began to rapidly mend, until he reached the convalescent stage.

Then he was able to write and dispatch letters to Haddon, but he was careful to avoid any reference to the causes which had kept him away, and he cherished a hope that he might be able to keep his Haddon acquaintances in ignorance of what had happened since he left them, for he was afraid that if the affair should get noised abroad it might still further prejudice him in the eyes of Dorothy.

After his marriage with her it would not matter. Then he would rule her as a woman should be ruled, according to his way of thinking. With his return to health he began to scheme again, and he resolved that when he got back to Haddon he would make a formal demand for Dorothy's hand, and urge his suit

with all the eloquence he was capable of commanding. Before he could start upon his return journey, however, Diabolo unexpectedly arrived, and the news that the manikin brought delayed the starting still longer.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE TIDE OF FATE.

Diabolo's sudden disappearance from Haddon Hall did not cause either Mistress Vernon or John Manners any concern. The fact of his being a spy was made clear by his going, because there could be little doubt that he had followed Aleyne, who had got a good start, however, and probably would be able to out-manuever the dwarf, cunning and clever as he was.

A week later Sir Falconer Bracebridge was back at Haddon, and Diabolo was with him. In reply to very natural questions that were put to him, the dwarf explained that he had had a dream that his master was ill, and so yielded suddenly to an irresistible desire to go to him.

"And did you find him ill?" was asked.

"Oh, yes, he had been ill, but was recovering."

This story was borne out by Bracebridge's

looks, and, no doubt, had been prearranged to account for the patient's pale face and wasted appearance, which, of course, could not be disguised. His own explanation was that he had been seized with a fever. In a sense, this was true, because fever had followed the wound. He had refrained from sending news of his illness, he said, as he was anxious to avoid alarming his friends.

Lady Vernon scolded him severely for this reticence, but expressed a hope that the air of Haddon would speedily restore him to sound health again, and, trading on her sympathies, which had been thus aroused, he pleaded to her to do all that she possibly could to hasten on his nuptials with Dorothy. The result was the lady began to importune Dorothy to consent to an early marriage.

As may be supposed, Bracebridge's return was not welcome to either Dorothy or John Manners. To her it was hateful to have to play the double part she was now called upon to undertake, but she was fully aware that she must play it unless she was prepared to abandon Manners and accept Bracebridge.

She felt now that rather than do that she would die. As it became perfectly evident that Diabolo was more vigilant than ever, and that

he watched all her movements, she deemed it desirable that for a time Manners should cease to hold communication with her. He saw the advisability of this himself, and consented to go to a remote part of the Haddon estate where a plantation was being made.

Naturally, John expected that within a day or so of Bracebridge's return Aleyne would come back also, but such was not the case; and when a week had passed he was still absent. The only way to account for this was that the inquiries he was pursuing were occupying more time than he anticipated. Two weeks went by, and still he was absent. Manners thought this delay strange, and yet he felt no uneasiness. When at the end of another week, however, Aleyne failed to put in an appearance, his friend could no longer repress a feeling of anxiety.

In the meantime he heard that Jedaan had reappeared, and had been seen at Bakewell, so he set off to find her and enlist her services in trying to ascertain what had become of his friend. She had been wandering about the country as usual, and was paying a final visit to Bakewell preparatory to journeying to the far north of Scotland. She expressed her readiness, however, to go in search of Aleyne,

and would use every endeavor to get tidings of him.

The weird woman at once set off, directing her steps in the first instance to Chorley. The very next day, strangely enough, a messenger arrived in hot haste to summon Bracebridge to the deathbed of his mother, an old lady of upward of eighty years of age. When Dorothy heard that he was going she insisted on Diabolo's going, too.

Bracebridge reminded her that he had brought him for her especial amusement, and was surprised that she was dissatisfied with him.

She hastened to explain that he didn't amuse her. On the contrary he filled her with repugnance, and she was afraid of him.

Bracebridge declared that he was as faithful as a dog.

Dorothy retorted that that might be, but some dogs were only agreeable to their masters, and could not be tolerated by other people. Diabolo was one of these.

In the end she carried her point, and to her intense relief saw the ugly little figure go off with his employer, and she hoped she might never more behold him. It was not until the following night that she was enabled to con-

verse again with John Manners, who could not conceal from himself or her the distress he felt by Aleyne's continued and mysterious absence.

A thought was uppermost in his mind though he dare not give it utterance, that his dear and devoted friend had come to an untimely end. On the principle that no news was good news, Manners hoped for the best, and yet a vague fear haunted him that all was not well. Nevertheless he resolved to urge his own suit with increased vigor.

He knew perfectly well that there must speedily be an end one way or other to these secret meetings. The risks of discovery were so great that it would be almost impossible to avoid them much longer. The laboring men with whom he was compelled to associate had at first wondered who he was, and now had become suspicious of him. He had been plied with questions, and something more than veiled hints had been let drop that he was there for no good purpose. If his identity should be revealed it would probably not only separate him for ever from Dorothy, but very seriously compromise Will Dawson, who had been so stanch and had done so much to help the lovers.

A consideration of these points, to which

John Manners would not close his eyes without being guilty of fatuous folly, determined him to bring matters to a climax one way or the other. The wedding day of Margaret was fast approaching, and once that had passed his chances of winning Dorothy would be still further lessened.

Up to the present each of them had, by tacit consent, avoided a discussion of what the end of their clandestine courtship was likely to be. Doll did not care to look ahead, and John avoided the subject until he felt perfectly sure that he had gained her heart. As he could no longer doubt that such was the case, he felt that the moment had come for an understanding as to what they were going to do. A brief meeting had been arranged in the woodman's hut in the Chase, and, as no such favorable opportunity might occur again, he embraced it.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SEAL OF COMPACT.

“Am I right, Doll, in supposing that I have become essential to your happiness?” asked John Manners, coming to the point at once, as soon as the mutual greetings had been exchanged in the little arbor in the wood.

“Ah, John, need you ask such a question?” she answered; “you know you are.”

“Very well, dear one; then don’t you think the time has now come when I may fairly ask what the end of this clandestine love-making is to be? Behold me—the son of an Earl, the representative of an old and honored family, garbed in leather jerkin, slouch hat, and boots of untanned leather, and think of the weeks of discomfort I have endured for the sake of the love I bear you.”

“You have done it all for sweet love, John. Do I not love you? And have I not deceived all nearest and dearest to me for your dear sake?”

"You have—you have, my beloved," he cried with rapturous joy as he folded her in his arms, and the tender, sensitive beauty of her young, fresh face was a study as the bright eyes danced with joy, and a flush of excitement encrimsoned the cheeks.

"But all things must have an end," he continued, "and since you have tested my fidelity and devotion, may I not claim my reward?"

"Ah, dear me, have patience, patience," she sighed.

"To what end, Doll? Only, perhaps, to be separated from you at last, and never again to see you."

"Oh, John, you frighten me when you say that. What would become of me? I should die or lose my senses were you to go from me."

"Then let us make our union so strong that none shall be able to separate us."

"But how can we do it?"

"You must elope with me."

She shuddered and drew away from him.

"It is impossible, impossible," she whispered, her face filled with an expression of distress. "I say it is impossible, I dare not."

"Why impossible, heart of my heart? You have to choose between the man you love and the man you hate."

"But, think," she cried, in a voice tremulous with agitation, "think what an elopement would mean. Disgrace to the family. The breaking of my father's heart——"

"No, I am sure he would soon become reconciled when he found the decisive step had been taken."

"I fear not," she sobbed, "and he has been such a kind, loving, doting father to me. He has worshiped me, placed me on a pedestal above everything and everyone else."

"And yet he would wed you to Sir Falconer Bracebridge?"

"He thinks it is to my happiness."

"But make it clear to him that it is not."

"He would say I am too young to be able to judge."

"Then take your fate in your hands."

"Ah, my beloved, tax your patience but yet a little while longer."

"And if I do, how will it change the situation? No, Doll, we must look the difficulty in the face. Either you must consent to fly with me and become my wife, or I vow, in the name of God, I will go away to the wars and end my life, for without you I have nothing to live for."

Again she shuddered, and her white fingers

closed around his arm, as, half-choked with emotion, she murmured :

“ You must not, must not leave me. My heart would break.”

“ Heaven knows that mine would be shattered if I were parted from you. But there is one way, and one way only, whereby we can become united to part no more. That way is flight. Say, will you brave it with me?”

She turned her eyes, suffused with tears, to his with a look of ineffable love and trust, and she struggled with herself for a brief space, as she thought of the confiding, doting father, who made a boast that his Doll could do no wrong. She loved and honored her father, but this man beside her had taken possession of her woman's heart, and her love for him o'ershadowed all other love. Her arms stole around his neck, her soft cheek was laid against his cheek, and she sighed out these words :

“ Take me, John, and if I do wrong, may God forgive me.”

Their lips met in a passionate, entrancing kiss. It was the seal of compact.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

COUNTERPLOTS.

On leaving Haddon, William Aleyne went direct to Chorley, so did Diabolo, but on setting out the dwarf had no idea that he was following in the tracks of Aleyne.

His suspicions had been aroused. He had watched in accordance with his instructions, but in spite of his cunning was baffled. Being suspected both by Dorothy and Manners, they had exercised unusual precautions to throw him off the scent. He had often come across Aleyne when Aleyne was acting as scout for his friend, but he couldn't quite make out whether it was Aleyne himself who was paying court to Dorothy. Therefore the matter became a little problem, and he wasn't quite equal to its solution.

One evening the dwarf and one of the lower servants at Haddon had been amusing themselves at a little inn in the hamlet of Rowsley. They were hurrying back so as to reach the

Hall before all the gates were closed for the night. The servant had stowed away more ale under his belt than he could comfortably carry, so Diabolo left him to find his way as best he could, and rapidly made for the tiny bridge spanning the Wye, and on which the crescent light from the slit in the chapel wall still shone.

As Diabolo neared the bridge his attention was arrested by voices—men's voices in low tones. The night was very dark. He stood still in the long meadow grass and listened. He strained his ears and caught this fragment of conversation :

“ At all costs Bracebridge must be outwitted, but the utmost caution is needed. To be discovered now would be our undoing.”

The men were John Manners and William Aleyne. They moved a little, and the ray of light just fell upon them ; but one had his back to Diabolo. That one was Manners. The other's face was discernible. That one was Aleyne. Another move, and they were in darkness again. In a few minutes the bell in the tower tolled ten. With the last strokes the light was extinguished, in accordance with the regulations, but the dwarf was aware that the two men crossed the bridge. He allowed them

a little start, then he followed, treading as if his feet were shod in wool.

The friends made their way up through the wood, passed round at a safe distance from the Eagle Tower, or main entrance, then proceeded to a door in the wall surrounding what was known as the "Well Field," so called because there was a well in it, from which part of the household supply of water was drawn. One of the two produced a key, opened the door, and both passed in, gently locking the door after them.

It was a feat of no difficulty whatever for the acrobatic dwarf to mount the wall. He was like a monkey. From his perch he saw a small light burning at Miss Dorothy Vernon's window. He guessed at once that it was a signal, so he waited and watched. Presently a man stealthily crept along until he was beneath the window, when he uttered a low whistle. The dwarf thought, but he was wrong, that the man was William Aleyne, whereas it was Manners.

The whistle was a signal.

At once the light was put out, the window was opened, and Dorothy Vernon spoke softly for a few minutes with her lover, but Diabolo was too far off to hear what was said. Then

the window was closed, a curtain drawn across it, and the man moved off.

Diabolo slipped from his perch, went to the main entrance, and having answered satisfactorily the challenge of the sentry, was admitted, inwardly chuckling at the discovery he had made. But his mistaking Manners for Aleyne was the means of bringing about a strange tragedy.

It is necessary to explain that neither Manners nor his friend was known by his proper name. The first was called Dick Weaver, and Aleyne passed as James Yoxall. In the course of the next day Diabolo learned that James Yoxall had gone away, and, believing him to be the secret lover of Dorothy, he resolved to speed to his master and tell him of his discovery, and he disappeared the next morning without breathing a word to any one.

On reaching Chorley William Aleyne, representing himself as a woodman seeking employment, and on the tramp to Westmoreland, found quarters at a humble inn called "The Green Man." This inn, part of Bracebridge's estate, was kept by a widower of the name of Stang, while his daughter Mary, a pretty, silly, light-headed wench, attended to the wants of the customers.

Mary Stang was a gossip, ready to chat with any one, for scandal and gossip were dear to her heart. Before he had been in Chorley two hours William Aleyne came to the conclusion that Mary Stang might unwittingly prove a useful ally, nor was he wrong. The sturdy, good-looking young woodman flattered Mary. He praised her good looks, her hair, her eyes, and declared she was fit to be wife to a man of quality. Mary was pleased, and thought the woodman a charming fellow. Having thus paved the way, he began to ply her with questions.

"Who lived in the old Manor House?" he asked.

"Oh, didn't he know? Why, Sir Falconer Bracebridge, a gentleman of parts, but not a saint by any means."

"Was he married?"

Mary grinned, and looked knowing. She believed he wasn't a marrying sort, but a general lover. He once tried to make love to her, but she would have none of him. Her opinion was that he was a sort of Bluebeard, and she was quite prepared to hear that he had taken a dozen ladies at least to his castle and murdered them all. Lately, with bated breath, it had been whispered that there had

been strange doings at the old Manor. A mysterious stranger had come there, and the lord had fought a terrible duel, and the lord had been well-nigh killed. Mary said she wouldn't be a bit surprised if she were told that the stranger was none other than his Satanic Majesty, for she was sure Bracebridge was a very wicked man, and, as he was accounted the finest swordsman in all England, she was of opinion that no one could have overcome him but the Evil One.

What Mary's father would have said if he had heard her talking so disrespectfully of his landlord can only be guessed, but she took good care not to let him hear. Her gossip was for the young woodman, who was such a capital listener, and praised her pretty face so, and spoke so nicely, and seemed so superior to the generality of woodmen.

Aleyne was in no hurry to move on. And as he had money enough and more than enough to pay his daily score, he was a welcome guest at The Green Man, and to none more so than Mary, who loved a little flirtation, for Chorley was a dull place, and life was hard, and it was seldom such an agreeable stranger graced the humble hostelry with his presence.

By means of this gossiping girl Aleyne

hoped to get in touch with some one in Bracebridge's employ who might be in possession of more reliable information than she had, and whose tongue could be unlocked with a golden key. Possibly he might have succeeded in accomplishing this desire had it not been for the arrival of Diabolo.

Anyone coming from the south and going to the Manor must of necessity pass through the village, and anyone going through the village would pass The Green Man.

It was toward the close of day. A glorious day it had been; cloudless and hot, and as the evening drew on there was a splendor of color in the western heavens, while a warm breeze came toiling over the vast expanse of open country and was as the breath of a furnace. Few who could avoid it cared to remain inside of their stuffy, ill-ventilated houses in such weather, and they sought the open, where gossip could be indulged in after the labor of the day.

Outside of the inn were tables and benches, and on one of the latter Mary, the gossip, and the merry young woodman who had made such an impression upon her sat together. Mary was busy with a spinning-wheel, and the woodman busy with his thoughts, his legs

cased in long boots of rough hide stretched straight out, his hands thrust deep into the side pockets of his tanned jerkin, his chin sunk on his breast. Mary's tongue kept time to the whirr of her wheel, and Aleyne was mersed in mental problems concerning the future. Suddenly the girl exclaimed as she ceased to spin:

"By all that's holy, what kind of beast is this that's coming?"

Aleyne looked up, and to his amazement beheld the monkey-like dwarf picking his way over the cobble stones of the narrow street. He was sure that the presence of the dwarf there boded mischief, and, not wishing to be recognized, he rose abruptly, and, mumbling some lame excuse about procuring a jug of ale, disappeared into the house.

But the quick ferret-like eyes of Diabolo had already spotted him, and his surprise was as great as that of Aleyne. Neither had dreamed of meeting the other in Chorley, and yet here they both were, and, each thinking his own thoughts according to the circumstances of his position, felt that the game was getting complicated and inexplicable.

It had been Diabolo's intention to wash the dust from his throat at the inn, but he

changed his plan, and, utterly indifferent to the sensation he caused among the rustic population, and apparently deaf to the remarks and chaff that greeted him, he passed on, pausing for a minute only to inquire of an aged cottager the route the Manor. When he was well away Aleyne came forth from the house again, bearing a mug of beer. Mary was all agape, and her eyes expressed the wonder of her mind.

"Did you see that thing, shaped like a man and yet looking like a monkey?" she asked all in a breath.

The woodman laughed. He laughed to disguise his own surprise and annoyance.

"Oh, an abortion," he answered. "A misshapen specimen of humanity. A cunning juggler and tumbler, I should think."

"How do you know that?"

"I met him in a village where I was only a short time ago. An amusing ape enough, but I dislike these misformed creatures."

Mary was racked with curiosity. She rolled out a dozen questions. What could the dwarf do? Did he perform juggler's tricks, and so on, and so on. Aleyne parried them as well as he could, and finally diverted her thoughts into another channel.

In the meantime Diabolo pursued his way

to the Manor. Now, it must be remembered that he was under the impression that this sham woodman was the secret lover of Dorothy Vernon, and that was the burden of the story he told to Bracebridge, whose amazement almost took away his breath. Never before in the whole course of his life had such a puzzle been presented to him.

Dorothy Vernon had a secret lover disguised as a woodman. This according to Diabolo, the faithful spy.

The secret lover had come to Chorley, also according to Diabolo.

Why had he come to Chorley?

That question seemed to admit of but one answer. He was there for no good purpose. He was there with evil intent. He was there to work mischief against Dorothy Vernon's affianced husband.

All this seemed so clear on the face of it to Bracebridge after he had turned the puzzle over and over in his mind that he deemed it of the utmost importance that he should lose no time in taking some steps to protect himself from the machinations of this evil-disposed knave who was masquerading as a woodman.

When, after much mental twisting, Bracebridge had come to this conclusion, he sum-

moned his henchman, Henry Sparbolt, the "Hal" of the Mill where John Manners had been imprisoned. He bade this fellow repair to The Green Man, accompanied by such assistants as he might deem necessary, and by strategy and cunning inveigle the woodman out, and then at all risks and costs bring him to the Manor. The host Stang was to be taken into confidence, and, as he was a dependent of the lord of the Manor, he might be relied upon to render assistance.

Sparbolt understood his business, and, being a willing tool, was not likely to err on the side of leniency. His interests were bound up with his master's, therefore he was to be depended upon. So he sallied forth when night had fallen, taking two others with him. They were provided with a quantity of cowhide thongs.

When the miscreants reached the inn Sparbolt made known his business to Stang, telling the landlord he was unconsciously harboring under his roof an arrant knave disguised as a woodman, whose object in being there, it was reasonable to say, was to take the life of the worthy lord of the Manor. This dastardly scheme had to be nipped in the bud. The woodman must be conveyed to the Manor, and there interrogated as to his purpose, and,

should his answer be unsatisfactory, the lord would be justified in visiting condign punishment on him. The landlord knew, of course, on which side his bread was buttered, and was quite ready to assist in laying the wicked woodman by the heels.

All unconscious of the plot that was hatching against him, William Aleyne sat in the kitchen with Mary, who was still spinning, and greatly enjoying her flirtation with this very agreeable young man, when Stang entered, and ordered his daughter to light the lantern, and repair to the dairy, and bring a jug of milk.

Then exactly what the landlord anticipated would occur did occur. William Aleyne jumped up, lit the lantern, and offered to accompany the maid. When they reached the dairy, which was at the end of a barn, and abutted on a field, Mary found that the key her father had given her was the wrong key, and she couldn't open the door. So she left the lantern with the woodman, while she ran back to the house.

No sooner had she disappeared than up sprang Sparbolt and his men. Aleyne was seized. The lantern was placed on the ground by the door, he was gagged before he could make a cry, bound in the vise-like grip of

Sparbolt before he could offer any resistance, and then, like a log of wood, was borne across the open fields, and so brought to the Manor. And, when Bracebridge came to see his captive, he was dumb with amazement as he recognized in the woodman William Aleyne, the man who had fought and slain his young friend, Ralph Bardsdale.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A PRISONER.

The surprise was mutual. When Aleyne recovered he demanded with red-hot indignation to know what all this meant, and why he had been made the victim of such an outrage. Bracebridge, although weak and ill, was like a volcano. His inward passion shook him. He seethed with wrath, for he regarded Aleyne as his rival. Had not Diabolo brought a report to that effect, and Diabolo was to be relied upon; he was cunning as the serpent, and not likely to be deceived.

Yes, this William Aleyne had had the unheard of audacity to disguise himself in order that he might wile Dorothy from her affianced husband. And, apart from that, William Aleyne had fought and killed Ralph Bardsdale, and for the death of Ralph Bracebridge had suffered, and been well nigh killed himself. And now William Aleyne, still disguised, was found in Chorley. What did he there? On

the face of it his presence was a menace. Bracebridge let himself go, and in a torrent of fiery invective he made it clear what he thought of his captive.

“And pray,” demanded Aleyne haughtily, “on what grounds do you bring me here as your prisoner?”

“On the grounds of right and justice. You are an impostor.”

Aleyne’s brow darkened as he said tauntingly, “It does not require much courage to insult a defenseless man. I give you back the accusation. I am no impostor, but you are unmistakably a coward. I tell you this to your face, although I am bound and weaponless, while you are free and armed.”

Bracebridge winced.

“Have a care,” he said; “it would be well for you to put a curb upon your saucy tongue.”

“I repeat that you are a coward; and I add to it now that you are a knave—a scurvy, treacherous, lying knave.”

“These words come with ill grace from a man who disguises himself in order that he may corrupt a lady who is already pledged in marriage.”

Something like a smile played about

Aleyne's mouth as he realized that Bracebridge was in ignorance of Manners being the secret lover, and he resolved that he would not enlighten him.

"Not to corrupt her," he said; "but to save her from you."

"Again I say, have a care."

"And again I say you are a coward. If you would prove yourself otherwise, order your creatures to free my arms from these thongs, place a sword in my hand, and meet me point to point as a true man should.

"I fight not with an assassin."

"Assassin!"

"Ay, else why do you come here in disguise. You would probably have taken my life in cold blood if opportunity had offered. But your villainous design has been nipped in the bud, and I'll warrant me I'll break your pride and teach you a lesson ere we part."

"Poltroon and reptile," sneered Aleyne, his indignation quite getting the better of him; to be described as an assassin maddened him.

"Hard words break no bones," replied Bracebridge, "and since you are neither gentleman nor honest man, I shall treat you as a cutthroat and ruffian, and exact from you a

bitter reckoning for having slain by a foul blow my honorable friend Bardsdale."

This was more than Aleyne could stand; the limit of his patience was reached, and, despite the thongs that bound him, he made a dash at his maligner, but instantly something sprang upon him and bore him to the ground. The "something" was the dwarf Diabolo, who had been lurking in a corner of the room unperceived by Aleyne, and sprang upon his back as a monkey might have done, throwing him forward on his face, and at the same moment almost the door opened and Sparbolt came in. Lifting the bound man as if he had been a mere bundle of straw, he carried him away and placed him in a darkened room.

Bracebridge was faithfully served by his creatures. In the case of Sparbolt it was a matter of expediency, for he was in his master's power; but with Diabolo and the others it was no doubt simply a matter of money. Bracebridge was a student of human nature, and knew how to appraise a man's value. From the first he felt sure that in the tricky, cunning little mountebank he had a valuable tool, for the manikin had been leading a hard life as a roving mountebank, and the advantage that would be his by faithful service to a wealthy

patron were apparent to him, and so Bracebridge found he had not made a bad bargain.

This was more than confirmed by the dwarf coming to Chorley with information about Aleyne, who, unfortunately for himself, had fallen into the power of an enemy utterly unscrupulous where his own interests were at stake. Bracebridge had made up his mind to marry Dorothy Vernon, and if he could possibly prevent it he was not going to allow anything or anybody to come between him and his object.

In making a prisoner of Aleyne, Bracebridge was, of course, clearly guilty of an illegal act; but such a man was not likely to be disturbed in his mind by a trifle of that kind. Besides, the law was lax and cumbersome, and a person in Bracebridge's position wielded a power which in the hands of an unprincipled person became despotism. So he gave his orders to his servants, and returned to Haddon under the impression that he had got rid of a troublesome rival, whom he could keep out of the way until he was no longer to be feared. It was true that he had tried to do the same with John Manners, but his victim had cleverly escaped from the trap and got clear away. But Bracebridge felt no uneasiness, strange to say,

for, firstly, he was of opinion that the whole affair had been managed so skillfully that, though Manners had escaped, he did not, and would not, know who had ensnared him. And secondly, it seemed to Bracebridge, after what had happened, highly improbable that Manners would ever return to Haddon.

In this respect the cunning and craft of Bracebridge overreached themselves, for he deceived himself into believing that John Manners was likely to hold his peace, notwithstanding that he had been the victim of a gross outrage, and was a gentleman of position, as well as a member of a noble and powerful family. But, like most men of his stamp, Sir Falconer Bracebridge was disposed to accept that for granted, which a little reflection would have convinced him was improbable.

It has already been stated that Mistress Vernon had by this time resolved that she would never become wife to Bracebridge, but, acting on the advice of faithful, devoted old Madge, she refrained for the time being from showing any open hostility to him. Nevertheless, he was aware that he did not possess either her confidence or her love, but the stake he was playing for was so high that he was not deterred from pressing his suit, more particularly

as he knew that Lady Vernon was on his side. She was as much a partisan of him as ever, and Doll had given up contending with her, since nothing came of it save bitterness.

The days that passed after Sir Falconer's return were days of much anxiety to Dorothy, for she knew that matters must shortly come to a climax. He had told her of his determination to press her father for a public announcement of the engagement, and he urged her so importunately to consent to a betrothal that she experienced great difficulty in keeping her feelings under. But it was impossible for her to close her eyes to the probable results if it was discovered that she had a secret lover, and that that lover was John Manners.

This period was undoubtedly the most trying in her whole career, and the state of her troubled mind was reflected in her face, so that her father noticed it, and questioned her about her unhappy looks. It was not an easy thing for Dorothy Vernon to deceive her father, who had been so good to her, but it had to be done for the sake of the man to whom she had given her heart.

It is quite probable that Dorothy labored under fears, which were altogether unjustified, and had she taken her father into her confi-

dence and given him distinctly to understand that she would have preferred death to being wife to Bracebridge, he would have ranged himself on her side. But past experience had discouraged her, and Lady Vernon's severity, no less than her influence with her husband, caused the poor girl to shrink from a frank avowal of her troubles, her hopes, and her fears. As for her sister Margaret, she was shut off from her, as it were, for Margaret was so absorbed in her own affairs and the preparation for her approaching marriage that she could converse of nothing else; and so Doll perforce had to pour her troubles into the ever open ears of old Madge, whose passionate attachment to the girl condoned for any misleading advice she might have given her.

Perhaps the only point on which the nurse was at fault was in not urging her charge to lay the case before Sir George Vernon; but like Dorothy herself, she believed that the Lord of Haddon was so much under the sway of his lady that any appeal to him would not only be useless, but utterly blight the girl's hope. And so they held together, and played their respective parts in the plot of a story that was to live for ever.

At last Bracebridge was called away, and he

and the objectionable dwarf disappeared to the intense relief of Dorothy Vernon. Lady Bracebridge had exceeded the allotted span of life, and having been passionately fond of her unworthy son, though, of course, she never deemed him unworthy, she sped an urgent message to him when she felt her end approaching, and he, in spite of the evil of his nature, loved her, and no second summons was needed to tear him from the presence of his hoped-for bride, and hurry him to the chamber of death in Spring Head Castle, near Blackburn, which had long been the residence of his mother.

And while Sir Falconer Bracebridge journeyed to Blackburn, Diabolo, acting on his master's instructions, journeyed to Chorley, where he was to await further orders.

CHAPTER XXX.

A BID FOR FREEDOM.

When William Aleyne found himself in the hands of his enemy at Chorley, his first feeling was one of almost uncontrollable exasperation. The cunning and artful manner in which he had been trapped showed that in spite of his disguise and his caution, the Lord of Chorley had outwitted him, and the captive was puzzled to understand how his identity had been revealed.

At this stage he did not suspect Diabolo, but it seemed clear to him that Bracebridge was well served by spies. But, notwithstanding his wounded pride and outraged feelings, Aleyne smiled to himself at the thought of the error Bracebridge had apparently made in suspecting him of being Dorothy's lover, and it was not likely he would go out of his way to enlighten him.

"My being here leaves John a clear course," he thought; and this very thought afforded

him so much satisfaction that his irritation gave place to a jubilant delight, for Bracebridge would be caught in his own snare, and Manners would bear off the prize. Viewing the situation in this light, he did not give himself any concern about the future. He never, for a moment, thought that his life was in danger. Bracebridge was a bold and unscrupulous rascal, but he would surely hesitate before lending himself to assassination.

All this was comforting philosophy for a time until the prisoner began to suffer in health from the confinement and restraint. He had been used to activity; to an outdoor life, and he felt the deprivation of liberty very keenly. As day after day passed, and brought no change, he grew irritable and moody, and contemplated making a desperate bid for liberty. Hal, the strong man, was his custodian, and from this fellow he demanded angrily to know why he was kept a prisoner there. But Hal was a fitting representative of his master. He was secretive, sullen, and cunning, and neither threats nor persuasion could move him. In reply to all questions he replied grumpily:

“I am not here to answer you but to carry out my orders.”

Aleyne was kept in a tower that flanked a

wing of the house, and he had the use of three small rooms, communicating with each other, though one of the rooms was nothing more than a windowless closet. The other two were poorly lighted; there was a window in each, but deeply embayed in the thickness of the wall.

One night, when the tax upon his patience and endurance was more than could be borne, Aleyne climbed up to one of the windows, and, reckless of consequences, shattered the casement to pieces, forced himself through the aperture, and plunged into space and darkness.

Instead of striking the ground as he anticipated, Aleyne found himself floundering in water. The water was deep, he could not swim, and death by drowning seemed inevitable. This inglorious way, however, of ending his life, so alarmed him that he battled for his existence with almost superhuman energy. He succeeded at last in reaching the bank. He drew himself out, but sank exhausted on the ground, and a blank ensued. It appeared that a stream of considerable volume flowed through the grounds, and the windows of the tower in which Aleyne had been confined, actually projected over a part of this stream. As he had descended over twenty feet in his

desperate leap, the chances are, had he struck the ground he would have been killed outright.

The noise of his fall and of his subsequent struggles in the water did not escape the ear of the gate warden, who got some of his mates together, and, provided with lanterns, they proceeded to make a search, with the result that they discovered Aleyne lying drenched and insensible on the bank. Hal was at once communicated with, a short consultation followed, and when Aleyne recovered his senses he was stretched on a bed of straw, and a cold icy blast seemed to be blowing upon him. He felt weak and ill, and so dazed and confused mentally that he couldn't quite realize the situation, and absolute exhaustion caused him to fall asleep.

He awoke some time afterward, and then remembered what had occurred, but the rest was a problem. Where was he? Certainly not in the room he had previously occupied. In time he made out that he was confined in what appeared to be an underground dungeon. The walls were irregular, and in places bulged. The floor was the natural earth. In the roof, which was high up, was a long, narrow shaft, a ventilating hole merely, through which a tiny strip of blue sky could be discerned. Down

this shaft came a current of cold, moist-laden air. The atmosphere of the place was damp, fusty, and there was a peculiar gaseous smell, which caused the prisoner to cough, and the coughing raised hollow echoes in the cavernous chamber. The entrance to the place was through an irregular, roughly hewn archway, but this entrance was closed by pieces of timber rudely fastened together to form a door.

When Aleyne had come to a knowledge of these things he could no longer take even a philosophical view of his position, for it was only too obvious that he was a victim of machinations that afforded him little ground for hoping that he would be able to free himself from the toils of his enemies. It was a maddening position. He felt chilled to the marrow, for his wet clothes had not been removed, he was ill and exhausted, and sinking with hunger. The walls and roof of his place of confinement were the solid rock. The rough door of the entrance was stout and strong, and precluded all chance of escape in that way. That he was far underground was proved by the shaft or hole in the roof through which air and light came, but while the wind rushed down like the blast from a blacksmith's bel-

lows, the feeble light that was admitted did little more than make the darkness visible.

At length sounds fell upon the wretched man's ears; the sounds of tramping feet awakening the booming echoes of some subterraneous and cavernous hollow. Then gleams of light fell through the interstices of the door; a bar was removed, and Hal stood in the threshold. Behind him were two or three other men with a couple of lanterns between them. The giant was armed with a sort of halberd, and he brought a supply of food and drink. But liberty was the ruling thought in Aleyne's brain at that moment; he demanded to be released, and threatened Bracebridge with the direct consequences for this outrage on a free subject.

Hal laughed mockingly. He made it known that in the absence of his master he was responsible for the prisoner's safe keeping, and as he had made a desperate attempt to escape, he had, for greater security, had him conveyed to a storage chamber in one of the upper levels of a disused mine on Bracebridge's estate.

Aleyne heard this with a sickening sense of despair which seemed to render him so inert for the moment that he was like a man stunned. Taking advantage of this Hal placed the food

and wine on the floor, and hurried away. Evidently he was anxious to avoid argument or discussion with his prisoner. For hours and hours—hours that stretched into days—Aleyne endured agony of mind and body. Immured in that living tomb, he was tempted to beat his brains out against the rock walls, and in all probability he would have yielded to this if he had not been upheld by a hope that he would yet be able to wreak a terrible vengeance on his pitiless foe. But he grew weaker naturally, and brain and body suffered.

Then once more the rumbling echoes were aroused by the tramp of feet in the external gallery, and at last Hal and his myrmidons stood in the doorway, and this time he was accompanied by the grinning, monkey-like Diabolo, who had just returned from Haddon. Aleyne sprang at the dwarf, who, taken unawares, was felled heavily to the ground. Then Hal struck the prisoner with his halberd, but Aleyne, with the strength of maddening despair, seized the weapon from the giant's hand, swung it round his head, and aimed a terrific blow, which Hal dodged; but the steel-headed halberd struck the wall of rock with such force that the lance wood shaft was shattered.

In a few seconds a strange sound arose;

there was a great cracking as if mighty baulks of timber were being wrenched, and then as if millions of bees had been suddenly let loose. Hal and his men heard this ominous and deadly warning, and, knowing its significance, and heedless of the prisoner and the stunned dwarf on the ground, they sped for their lives, and Aleyne rushed after them; but the earth trembled; there was a rumble as of distant thunder, that increased and swelled into one appalling mighty uproar; a blast of air with a speed greater than the fiercest hurricane that ever blew swept through the mine, which was rent, torn, and shattered by an explosion that brought down tens of thousands of tons of rock, and buried all the flying men for ever and ever fathoms deep below.

And the cause of this tremendous explosion, from which no living thing came forth, was due to Aleyne having struck with the halberd a vein of slickensides, or galena, to give it its scientific name, in the rock wall. The effects of a blow on this mysterious mineral, which is found in abundance in some mines, is an explosion which shatters the earth to pieces like an earthquake, and sweeps to immediate death every living thing within the radius of its force. Hal the giant, three men who accompanied

him, Diabolo the dwarf, and poor William Aleyne met with a swift and sudden end in the mine which had been Aleyne's prison, and now was his tomb.

For a long time the mine had not been worked owing to the presence of veins of the deadly "slickenside," which made the working of it too dangerous. Hal had regarded it as an absolutely safe place of confinement for his master's enemy. The object of Diabolo's visit to the prisoner was to offer him, in the name of Bracebridge, his freedom if he would pledge himself to quit the country. But a terrible and wholly unlooked-for retribution had fallen upon the too willing tools of Bracebridge's villainy; though, unhappily, poor William Aleyne had been involved in the strange disaster.

CHAPTER XXXI.

TRIUMPH.

Sir Falconer Bracebridge's absence at the deathbed of his mother allowed Dorothy Vernon and her secret lover to make good progress with their wooing. Naturally Manners was concerned by the strange silence of his bosom friend, but he consoled himself with the thought Aleyne had found the difficulty of getting the information he desired greater than he anticipated, and so was prolonging his stay. Anyway Jedaan had set off after Aleyne, and her readiness of resource and her wit would probably enable her to bring back a good report.

For some time no word came from Bracebridge. Then he wrote to Lady Vernon to say that his mother had lingered, and had only just died; that he was broken down with grief, and had much to attend to, but he hoped to be back at Haddon in time for Margaret's wedding, which was now close at hand. He added

that he hoped Dorothy was not fretting too much, and that he dreamed of her night and day.

At Haddon Hall affairs were not likely to stand still because of the absence of Sir Falconer Bracebridge, however important he might appear in Lady Vernon's sight; and so the preparations for the marriage were pushed forward with great vigor, and in the whirl and hum of these preparations Dorothy was overlooked and almost forgotten. Not that that caused her any concern. On the contrary, she rejoiced, for it enabled her, John, Will Dawson, and Madge to perfect their scheme for utterly and forever defeating Bracebridge. For good or for evil, Dorothy Vernon had given her solemn pledge to John Manners, and she had no intention of retracting at the eleventh hour.

At length the fateful marriage morning dawned, and in the private chapel of Haddon Sir Thomas Stanley and Margaret Vernon were joined together in the bonds of holy matrimony in accordance with the Roman Catholic ritual. In the history of Haddon there had probably never before been gathered under the hospitable roof such a number of distinguished guests. Every available room in the

great pile of buildings had been utilized, and in order to accommodate the fifty additional servants who had been engaged to minister to the wants of the visitors a temporary wooden house was erected outside of the main entrance. A special and renowned band of musicians had been brought down from London, and for days an army of decorators had been at work, and when the night came and dancing commenced the scene in the great ballroom was one of surpassing brilliancy, and unique in Haddon's history.

No energy and no expense had been spared to make the event one of such splendor that future generations of Derbyshire people would speak of it with pride.

All day long there had been feasting and junketings. Scores of beggars had fed on the fat of the land at great tables spread for them under the trees in the wood near the main entrance. Extra fireplaces were contrived to meet the strain of the demand in the cooking department, and down in the valley by the banks of the Wye the entire carcasses of cattle and sheep and deer had been roasted in the open air, for, fortunately, the weather was splendidly fine. With the falling of darkness the Hall broke out into a blaze of light, and

the sounds of revelry rose on the still night air. And there was laughter and song, jest and wit, and many an al fresco love scene under the trees.

In the ballroom, ladies and gentlemen of high degree danced with all the stateliness and grace of the times, and many a gallant contended for the honor of treading a measure with sweet Dorothy, who by common consent was the belle of the room. Never had she looked more beautiful than she did that night. She was simply but artistically attired, and her glorious hair was adorned with flowers, amid which glittered a band of gold set with diamonds and pearls, the gift of her brother-in-law. Her face was flushed, her eyes brilliant, and it might have been noted that now and again she gave a wistful glance at the face of a quaint old clock that slowly ticked off the hours in a recess in the room.

At last the hands marked eleven, and a few seconds later the great turret bell announced to the little world that the eleventh hour had ended. The revelry was at its height, and, taking advantage of everyone's attention being absorbed, Doll slipped from the great ballroom, and gained an ante-room, from which a flight of eleven stone steps gave access to the

terrace. Madge was waiting for her, with a long cloak and a pair of strong shoes.

Dorothy tore the flowers from her hair, hastily put off her dancing shoes, and slipped on those Madge had brought. The long cloak covered her ball dress, and its hood hid her masses of hair. And now the fateful and supreme moment had come. She flung her arms round the neck of her dear, faithful old nurse, who was choking and sobbing with emotion. The nurse stammered a whispered blessing on her love bird, and then the love bird flew down the steps into the darkness of the night. A haze was in the air, and the stars seemed to twinkle through a veil of gauze. There was no moon; the air was still, and with dreamy, rhythmical murmur the Wye talked to the veiled stars and the hushed trees of Dorothy Vernon's flight.

Will Dawson was waiting at the end of the terrace. He helped her over the wall, and then guided her down the steep declivity to the river. The tiny bridge was gained. The crescent light still shone upon it, for on this particular night the ordinary rule of extinguishing it at ten o'clock had not been observed.

Doll pressed Dawson's hand, and murmured

a "God bless you," then, like a spirit of the woods, she ran or flew through the beam of light to the darkness on the other side of the river, where her lover with two horses awaited her. A hurried kiss; he lifted her to her saddle, sprang onto his own horse, and went at a walking pace until Rowsley was gained.

The village was nearly entirely deserted for all the villagers who could go were at Haddon. As soon as they left Rowsley the fugitives let their horses go. They sped through the dreamy vale of Darley, and past the little hostelry where John had fought the duel, and where he had lain well-nigh stricken unto death. On through Matlock and past the great High Tor they went, and slackened not their pace until the suburbs of Derby were gained. John Manners managed to arouse the people at a hostelry, and by means of liberal payment silenced inquiry if he did not stop curiosity. Food and fresh horses were procured, and once again the runaways were in full flight.

Dorothy's flight from her home was not discovered until more than two hours had passed from the time she met her lover. Her father missed her and asked for her. Some servant said she was in her room. A message was sent,

but the messenger came back to say she was not there. Through the grounds and on the terrace her name was called, but called in vain. Anxiety began to manifest itself, a search was made throughout the house, Madge was roused from her bed, but gave no sign that she knew of the flight. The mystery deepened.

Presently a half-drunken servitor of one of the guests, who had been roystering by a fire that burned in the valley, declared that he had seen a cloaked woman and a man ride across the valley from the direction of the bridge. This information stirred everyone into action. There was a call for horses, which were saddled with all speed. Gentlemen guests buckled on their swords, and retainers armed themselves with cudgels, though why heaven only knew. Then through woods and valleys the pursuers spread themselves, and parties rode east, west, north, and south.

But they straggled back again in twos and threes, in fours and fives, in the light of dawning day, but never a sign had they seen of Dorothy. A gloom fell upon the bridal party, and the festivities were brought abruptly to a close. Lady Vernon was scornful and bitter, and expressed her belief that her stepdaughter had gone off with some ill-bred hind. Sir

George was silent, and shut himself in his room, for his sorrow cut him to the soul. His favorite daughter, upon whom he had doted, had gone from him, and when Margaret had left he would be a lonely, broken-hearted old man. He braced himself up to speed his parting guests, and utter a blessing on his newly married daughter and her husband, and when all had gone he abandoned himself to his grief. The proud man was humbled, and wept. His child had gone—the world was darkened for him.

A little more than a week from Margaret's wedding night had flown when there came a mounted messenger to Haddon Hall. He had ridden hard from Leicestershire, and he brought letters from John and Dorothy. These letters told in outline the story of the secret wooing, the flight, the marriage; the writers prayed for forgiveness, and to be allowed to return. Lady Vernon was obdurate and scornful. She talked of broken pride, of outraged honor, of sullied escutcheon, of the disgrace to the family, and much more nonsense to the same effect, and suggested that the door of Haddon should be forever closed against the "jade" who had brought this humiliation and sorrow upon them.

But Sir George rose strong in his might at last. He was lord of his own house. He was ruler even of his wife; his word should be law. Dorothy was the core of his heart, and he didn't allow false pride to desolate his hearth. So back a message was sent to the fugitives, bidding them return, when all should be forgiven, and the boar's head and the peacock should be blended ever more in the arms of the Vernon and Rutland families.

As soon as ever the message reached them, Dorothy Manners and her well-loved husband started for Haddon, and so overjoyed was Sir George to have his pet bird back again that he ordered a second bridal feast to be prepared, and once more revelry and song resounded through the hall, and John Manners openly took his place as the honored husband of the youngest and most beauteous of the King of the Peak's daughters.

A shadow fell upon him a few days later when Jedaan brought him word that his true and tried friend, William Aleyne, was supposed to have perished in an explosion in one of the mines on Bracebridge's estate. So much she had gathered, but the rest was all mystery, which even she was unable to solve. She further said that she had learned that Sir Fal-

coner was lying seriously ill at his late mother's house. The wound which he had received in his fight with Ralph Bardsdale's kinsman had never properly healed, and in dismounting from his horse, after returning from his mother's funeral, he slipped and wrenched himself; the wound opened afresh, and owing to the unskilled treatment of a barber surgeon, symptoms of gangrene ensued, and spreading rapidly blood poisoning was set up, and in a few weeks' time the news reached Haddon that Sir Falconer Bracebridge had paid the penalty of mortality, and passed through the valley of the shadow of death. To Lady Vernon the news was a shock, and it caused her real distress, for she could not detect the hand of Fate in all the events of the last few months. Probably she was the only mourner Bracebridge had at Haddon.

John Manners tried to induce the strangely gifted Jedaan to settle down, but she laughed and said the wild and restless spirit within her rendered that impossible. She must move on, and would continue moving, until the debt of nature was paid. One night she disappeared as suddenly as she had come, and Haddon knew her no more.

Honest Will Dawson, who had rendered

such yeoman service to the lovers in their secret wooing, was not forgotton; while dear, faithful, wise old Madge, was destined to pass three happy, peaceful years more with her "sweet love-bird," and then very suddenly one night to fall into the sleep that hath no awakening.

Madge was a lowly born woman, but she had helped, and, indeed, been mainly instrumental in changing the fortunes of two great houses; and she had saved the sweet and beautiful Dorothy Vernon from the terrible fate of being bride to a man who would probably have wrecked her happiness and ruined her life.

THE END.



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